

The Great Cleric

White-Collar Survival in Another World

5

Broccoli Lion

Illustrator: sime



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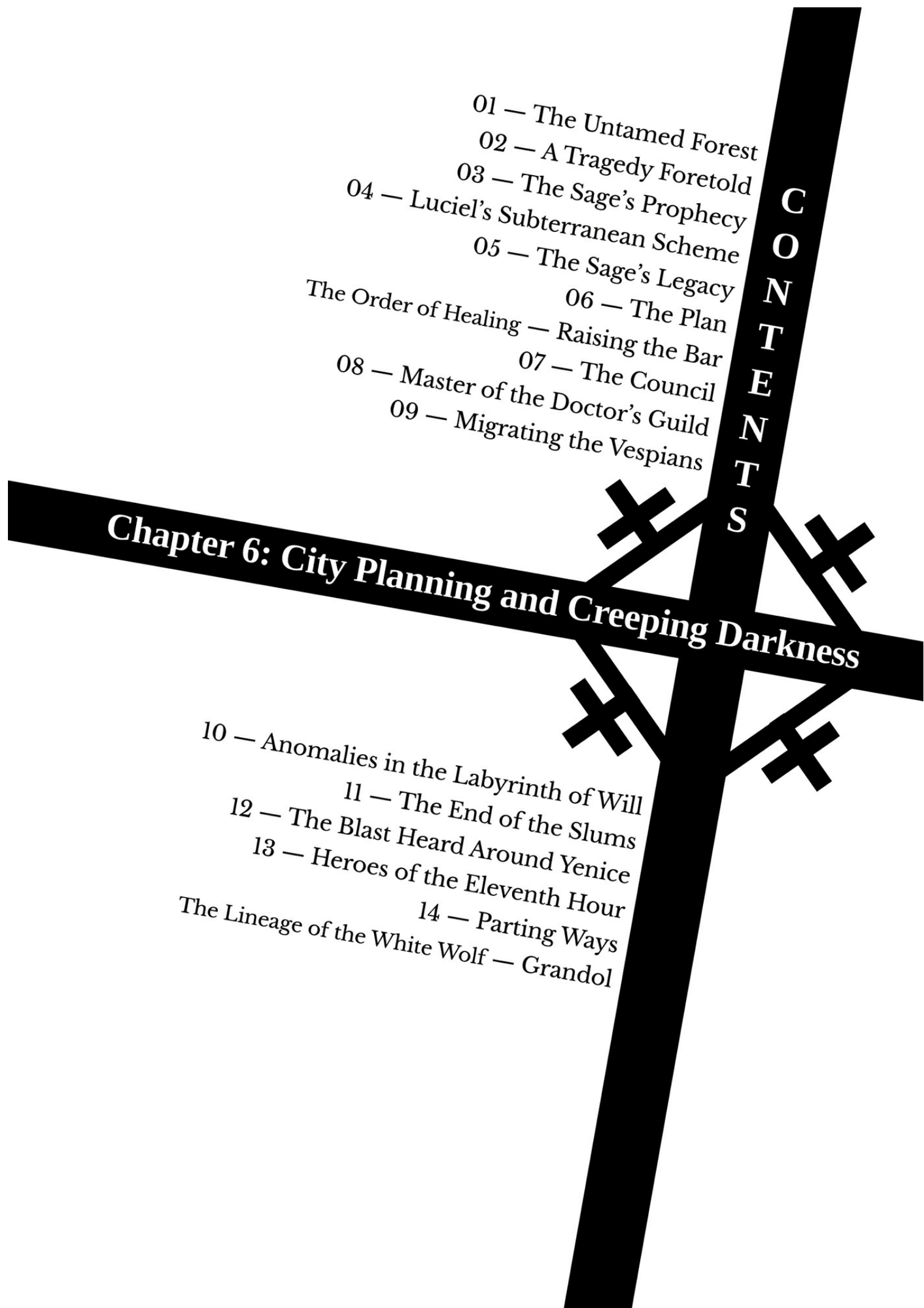
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Chapter 6: City Planning and Creeping Darkness

01 — The Untamed Forest

A day had passed since I'd taken the helm of Yenice's slum district and its future. That morning, Lionel, the other slaves, and I set out for the thick forest that covered the country's southern border with the goal of scouting for materials, which we knew it had more than enough of based on reports from the Adventurer's Guild and Kefin's firsthand experience.

So why were we going out of our way? Well, there were two reasons. The first was that I wanted to get a head start before I had so many eyes on me that I couldn't do anything. Renovating the entirety of the slums was a lofty goal that required appropriately grand amounts of resources, and that meant making extensive use of my magic bag. The rub, then, was the undue amount of attention that waltzing around town flaunting such a rare magic item would garner. The pope had warned me not to make a show of it, and I was intent on taking that advice, especially before I knew which representatives in the council I could trust.

Reason number two was simply to, well, make a show of it. I was hoping to earn a bit of goodwill from the Yenitians by taking matters into my own hands, considering the less than welcoming reception the Healer's Guild had received from them. Shurulian healers were infamous for being racist, greedy, and generally unpleasant, so it was no wonder we weren't well-liked. Our free demonstration at the Adventurer's Guild some time prior had definitely helped things, and my becoming a so-called "dragonslayer" certainly didn't hurt, but now was the time to make a real gesture for the people, to show them results.

I mean, what else was there for me to do? Jord and the other healers were so great at handling the in-house guild work that I sort of *had* to take this public position or else I wouldn't have much to my name. Yeah, that was it. I was the bridge between the guild and the people! Or so I told myself.

“Don’t worry,” Jord had said on our way out. “You leave the guild to me and the Order. We’ll handle things here.”

I wasn’t upset or anything. Just conflicted.

One month. So much had happened in barely *one month* in Yenice. It was enough to make my head spin and, frankly, I just hoped things would keep working out. I didn’t want to stick around to see the backlash if they didn’t.

In the ten days leading up to my inauguration as Yenice’s head of state, Kefin had done some digging for me, and the information he’d uncovered made one thing clear: this wasn’t going to be easy. I’d racked my brain for ways to better the country, new industries that would suit the various beast races, but the other council members weren’t receptive. The people were, according to them, already too preoccupied with their current jobs to bother with populating new ones. When I pressed the issue, I was shot down with statistics. About eighty percent of Yenitians were working, and the remaining twenty percent were children, elderly, or disabled.

Based on *my* sources, though, only about half of those workers were actually productive. I also had the feeling that employment discrimination between races pervaded their society, but I ended up dropping the issue. There wasn’t much I could do in the short year my term afforded. In any case, the council didn’t want sweeping change. That much was evident. But maybe I could make a difference in the slums, at the very least.

Forêt Noire neighed, interrupting my inner soliloquy.

“Sorry, girl. I know you hate it when I get distracted.”

Lionel trotted up next to me, Ketty in tow. “Is something bothering you? Your brow is awfully furrowed.”

“No, just...” I paused. “A lot’s happened since I came here. Most of it unexpected, so I was getting a little nervous about this whole idea. Not this trip to the forest, that is. The entire plan.”

“Understandable. But you have nothing to worry about with Dhoran and Pola heading construction.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

But it wasn't *building* the school and adventurers' housing that I was worried about. It was what nonsense would get slapped on in addition. Magical applications meant to improve quality of life were one thing, but I didn't want to look away for one second and then find the schoolhouse was a giant golem.

"Regardless, my chest pounds at the prospect of meeting unknown foes in the savage wilderness," said Lionel.

"He's right, y'know!" Ketty added with a feline smile. "Stop trying so hard all the time and beat your worries into some monster instead!"

"Need I remind you both that we're here to gather materials?"

Ketty replied with a groan. For the record, "beating monsters" had never once been a source of relief for me. On the contrary, my mental health fared far better the fewer we encountered. Then again, maybe a nice nature walk would do me some good.

Seeming to have noticed my discomfort, Lionel changed the subject. "I noticed the letters you sent were addressed to the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild."

"Yeah, I know a couple wolf-men there who know Yenice better than me. I told them about the situation." This place was their hometown, so I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping they might come to lend a hand.

"I see." He went quiet. Thinking about my master, I supposed.

"Hey, so how much stuff are we getting?" Ketty asked.

"I've never tested how much a magic bag can actually hold, so I'm not sure. We've got two, though, so as much as we can. I'm hoping we can get at least half of everything we need."

"We could camp out, hm?"

"Today's just supposed to be for scouting, so I'd like to be back in town before sunset."

"What I'm hearing is the kitty gets to hunt till evening!"

Ketty resumed her usual humming. She was Lionel's problem, not mine.

Lionel and the carefree cat-woman acted as my personal guards for the day, but the real stars would be Dhoran, Pola, and three new slave women I'd come upon through no fault of my own. With their help, the plan just might go smoother than expected.

I glanced at the carriage behind us, then back at the trees peering at us from afar.

The road vanished some time later, replaced by dirt and grass, flattened by the boots of adventurers. We came to the forest's edge and, aside from it seeming to extend into infinity, it looked exceedingly normal. And ripe for gathering.

"Get Dhoran and the ladies from the wagon, please."

"Got it," Ketty replied.

Soon after, Dhoran, Pola, and three elves stepped out. The trio of women was our new secret weapon.



Now, where had I found these three, and why were they my slaves? To answer that question, I'll have to go back in time a bit, to before I took up my seat in the Yenitian council.

After Shahza, the tiger-folk representative, died, the Doctor's Guild vice guildmaster, Grohala, finally broke. And boy did he have some juicy info. As it turns out, Grohala wasn't the only Illumasian agent. The slaver who'd sold me Lionel, Ketty, Nalia, Dhoran, and Pola was an assassin of the empire, and his job had been to search for wealthy (or otherwise greedy) beastfolk. Upon learning this, Guildmaster Goldhus immediately rushed to the agent's place of business, but he'd already fled. And in a hurry too. All they found were fourteen slaves, abandoned and emaciated. Unfortunately, the troubled young man I'd interviewed wasn't among them.

Because slaves in this world were essentially property, discovering the abandoned merchandise logically gave Goldhus rightful ownership. As the saying goes, finders keepers. But they were ultimately brought to me as an apology for letting the slaver slip through their fingers and probably as an act of goodwill for the remaining two slavers in town. The fact that the slaves were malnourished to the point of near-death likely played a factor in Goldhus's generosity as well, I felt. Electing to ignore that bit of cruelty, I told them I wasn't interested in owning slaves for the sake of owning slaves and that I'd more than likely end up freeing them once they were back in good health.

But in their defense, there was another reason they'd been sent to me: the chance that their runaway master had left them with dangerous orders, perhaps even suicidal ones. I could cast Dispel and free them of it easily, and casting Dispel obviously meant ridding them of the mark of a slave—their binding crests—which they were supposedly eager to see. However, I made clear that once they were free, I'd need to bind them again if anyone wanted to work at the Healer's Guild. We had too many secrets that we couldn't risk leaking.

Once I'd hushed everyone up about what was about to happen with magical contracts, I freed the slaves, then restored them with Extra Heal. Seeing their apathetic expressions turn to joy reminded me how it felt to help people. It had been so long.

And this was where I ran into problems. I had *just* finished removing everyone's crests when, all of a sudden, they begged me to put them back! Under *my* charge! Needless to say, I was a little baffled. I asked them what in the world was wrong with them, and they'd said they had nowhere else to go anyway, that they'd heard from a certain dragonewt I treated slaves with respect and dignity.

I had slowly turned to the one dragonewt conveniently standing nearby. Goldhus was sweating bullets.

Long story short, the ex-slaves had chosen to return to their lives of submission, which Nalia enthusiastically welcomed, as a matter of fact. She became very adamant about educating and raising them to become the guild's future staff, a "generation of fine stewards and stewardesses," as she put it, earning a practiced sigh from Lionel and a round of laughter from Ketty for some reason.

And so Nalia was presently absent from the day's excursion. Team Verdel, one of the frontrunners in the labyrinth, stayed back for guard duty as well.

As for the slaves, I couldn't say I had much experience with indentured servitude, either in this life or my past one, so I found the master-slave relationship exhausting. The three women were my equals, as far as I was concerned. Partners, like Lionel and the rest. Only, every time I looked at them, that sleazy man's face came to mind.

"I'm not really into how it feels like we just kind of usurped that slaver guy," I griped.

"I bet they're glad you did, though," Ketty said. "I know I am."

Lionel grinned. "As am I. We owe you a debt of gratitude, and for that, you have our swords."

"Thanks, guys." I felt all warm and fuzzy inside. "I still don't know if we're lucky that the guy's out of our hair or unlucky that he got away."

"Is Grohala's confession weighing on you? If the empire was the slave trader's supplier, it could be troubling."

"Right, and now that he's gone, we'll never know what his connection with

Illumasia was. I really get the feeling those guys don't like me now."

Here's hoping I hadn't stepped on a national slave trade.

"Be proud," he chuckled. "You saved fourteen lives."

"Yeah, you did a good thing for them. No doubt they're happy, even if you're all frowny about it," Ketty smiled.

"And the people won't soon forget your deeds with the creation of the orphanage."

"Dhoran and Pola are the ones who made it, and Nalia volunteered to teach. All I've done is flip-flop slaves. Seriously, who asks to go back to slavery?"

"Can ya blame them? Some of those kids were missing arms and legs, and more hadn't had real food in forever. I know I'd rather stick with the guy who feeds me over gettin' tossed out on the street."

"Sorry, you're right. I shouldn't keep complaining. Let's focus on the task at hand."

"Understood," they replied.

As the dwarves and elves made their way here from the wagon, so too did the bickering.

"Not just metalwork, though. Dwarves are the best at magic artificing too."

"You're only considering the physical aspect. Artificing is *magical*, and as such it's one's affinity with mana that's most crucial. Therefore, I am the better artificer. It's just logic."

Pola and Lycian had been hashing it out over magic items ever since they first met, and now they seemed to be neck-deep in a very structured and polite debate.

"Now, listen here, missy. We dwarves have got fire and earth on our side. Practical stuff. The boss needs us more than you."

"Practical? Please. I see age and wisdom are *clearly* distinct traits. Wind is the breath of life, water the blood. The elves have much more to offer Mister Luciel."

“Oh, don’t you talk to me about age! Three of my lifetimes is too damn many, ya crock!”

Dhoran and Milphene, meanwhile, were seething over which of their favored spirits were the best.

“C-Come on, guys. No more fighting.”

Last came the flustered human-elf halfling, Creia. She, like her companions, could see spirits, but communicating with them was still beyond her. There had been nothing but pain and despair in her eyes when I’d first seen her. These days, though, she was hopeful again. I was glad to have helped her.

I sighed. “Lionel, can you shut them up already?”

He only cackled. Ketty nonchalantly turned away.

“Guys, get over here,” I groaned. “Stick to the plan. Lycian, Milphene, work on teaching Creia how to speak with spirits, and keep us updated on which trees they’ll let us cut down.”

“Understood.”

“Team Kefin, you guard them. Take this rope and tie it to yourselves so you don’t get lost.”

Another round of acknowledgment.

“Dhoran and Pola, focus on dropping trees. Lionel, Ketty, help however you can, but stay with me.”

Lionel saluted, Dhoran grunted, and Pola nodded.

“Yulbo, you and your team watch the horses. Keep an eye out for monsters and adventurers outside the forest.”

They stood at attention. These guys could’ve really given the Order of Healing a run for their money. I could only imagine how formidable they’d become after a few lessons with my master or Galba.

Lycian and Milphene started relaying information as we entered the forest.

“Seems like a lot of the trees here are fair game.”

“So it would seem,” Lionel said. “Perhaps I can make use of the flaming greatsword you gave me.”

“Just don’t burn the forest down, please.”

“Never.”

The most skilled swordsmen in this world could fell trees with one stroke, without even embedding their blades in wood. As I witnessed this raw talent in action, Ketty went about severing the branches in short order. And they hadn’t even stolen the show. Pola’s golem knocked them down one by one while Dhoran got to work with his greataxe, substituting it for his usual war hammer. I made my way from trunk to trunk, collecting the lumber in my magic bag. We were a well-oiled machine. In only half an hour, we’d gathered well over a hundred trees.

“Dhoran, how much wood do we need, exactly? Including extra.”

“Well, this is good size timber we’ve got here.” The dwarf laid his hand on one of the fallen logs, about twenty meters long and five to seven meters wide, at a glance. “Considerin’ what we’ll scrounge up from the slums, I’d say we need about six hundred, all told. We won’t be needin’ any for that medical whatsit, aye?”

“No, we’ve discussed the new district in the council already. That’s good to hear. This shouldn’t take too long, in that case.”

The current objective was to build fifty houses for adventurers and a schoolhouse over three times the size of an Adventurer’s Guild. And I intended to do it without relying on the council for funding.

Suddenly, a guttural shriek stirred the otherwise tranquil woods.

“Everyone,” I shouted, “stay alert! Lionel, I’m permitting the use of your sword’s flames!”

“Understood,” he replied.

“Move out!”

At the source of the scream, we found Kefin, his team, and the elves on the ground.

“Does anyone see any sign of the enemy?”

“No luck,” Ketty said.

“My first suspicion was treants, but I don’t sense any mana fluctuations,” Lionel added.

“Okay. Don’t let your guard down. What in the world was that scream, though?”

I cast Area High Heal, then Recover on each of the wounded. Everyone was back on their feet soon enough, albeit clutching their heads and dazed.

“What happened?” I asked Kefin.

“I went to pick up a fruit from one of the fallen trees, but there was some kinda weed in the way. When I pulled it out...”

“It was a mandrake,” Lycian huffed. “I *tried* to stop you, but you hardly gave me the chance.”

“I’m just glad everyone’s okay,” I said.

The shriek of a mandrake was so dangerous that it had earned some nasty rumors. Most stories and accounts called it fatal.

“Can’t they be used for medicine?”

“You’re well informed, but I’m afraid that was long in the past,” Milphene explained. “There’s a particular method for preparing mandrake that the Doctor’s Guild has kept secret for many years, but it was lost to time when a noble took issue with the guild’s monopoly on such knowledge. It’s said they were used to create panaceas that could heal what magic couldn’t.”

From cure-all elixirs to a common weed. Talk about yikes.

“That’s too bad. Anyway, let’s try and be more... Is it just me or is the ground shaking?”

“Swords at the ready,” Lionel said flatly. “Monsters approach.”

Maybe it’s not the scream itself that gave those things their reputation, I thought.

“Stay alive! As long as you’re breathing, I can heal you!” I summoned the

Illusion Staff and a shield from my bag, then cast Area Barrier. “Lycian, Milphene, Creia, use these bows and any spirit magic you can!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Very well.”

“Dhoran, Pola, slow them down with your golem!”

Pola nodded.

“Kefin, you and your group keep the monsters off Pola and the elves!”

“Got it.”

“You two.” I pointed to Lionel and Ketty. “Go nuts.”

Lionel cackled. “Music to my ears.”

“Oh yeah, claws out!”

The beasts quickly started to rear their heads.

“There’re a lot, but don’t get flustered. We’re all getting bonuses if we make it out of this!”

What was supposed to be a simple scouting mission had turned into a whole lot more. But no one was going to die here. Not me, not anyone else. I readied my staff.

The ground-rumbling horde didn’t wait. First came savage, beastly animals, then hobbling green children followed right on their heels.

“Forest wolves, goblins, orcs, trolls,” Lionel muttered. “They have numbers, I’ll give them that.”

Ketty charged in as the elves began to rain down arrows, forcing the wolves to stumble and slowing their assault.

Lionel braced his shield. “I’ll draw away the trolls! The goblins and orcs are yours!”

“I’ll keep them back,” Pola replied, puppeting a towering construct of stone.

“You focus on healin’.” Dhoran stood in front of me and gripped his axe. “Any

critters with the stones to get close'll have to go through me."

Ketty wove through the throngs of monsters, cutting down any that were unlucky enough to be in her path, while Lionel filleted creatures twice his size in showers of flame and blood. Pola's golem blew away an orc with a flying knee, then like some sort of loud and obnoxious cowboy, she signaled the golem to run by touching her left elbow and making what looked like bull horns with her left fist. The construct then performed a stunning pirouette that could only be described as beautiful, grabbed the fallen monster's legs, and twirled it into the horde. The airborne beast not only impeded their march, but even destroyed the trees in its path.

"Now's our chance to show those dwarves just who's 'practical'!" Milphene exclaimed. *"Spirits of the wood, dwellers of life, heed my call. Bind these creatures where they stand!"*

"The forest is an elf's domain. That dwarven woman won't outdo me. *Spirits of breeze and gale, hear my plea. Rip our foes asunder with winds of scoring!*" Lycian chanted.

"Wow, you two are amazing!" Creia cried. "I'll shoot some arrows!"

Roots and branches crept towards the monsters' feet, then tightened around them as razor sharp winds raced through, lacerating the immobilized enemies. Creia's aim, meanwhile, was true, and arrow after arrow lodged squarely into the beasts. Some escaped the devastation only to meet their ends at Ketty's hands.

I purified the field in the midst of battle and collected corpses—the source of the sanguine stench—as they dropped. My thoughts wandered to the rumbling in the ground that still persisted. The stampede was rather large, yes, but surely not to the point that the quaking would go on for this long. And then I noticed that the trees were getting denser.

"Dhoran, there are more trees around us than there used to be. They could be more monsters."

"What?! How in the hell can ya tell?"

The treants had evidently slipped in unbeknownst to anyone, and the chaos

only made it harder to sense their magic. But if I shouted this knowledge to everyone, I'd risk breaking their concentration. As of now, our hands were already full with the monsters we *could* see, so if those became too much to deal with, things could get bad. Fast. I racked my brain, then had an idea.

"Put these on."

"Aw hell..."

He hesitated for a moment before finally taking the nose plugs. I immediately took out a barrel of Substance X, and the rumbling stopped at once.

"I'm going to give one of the treants a test cut. Keep an eye out in case something happens."

I fastened the barrel to myself, switched the staff to sword-mode, and prepared to take a swing at the disguised monster. The magic in my blade glowed white, but something was different this time. A strange red hue emanated from it.

"That's right. The Flame Dragon did something to it," I muttered.

I swung at the tree and it wailed, white flames flitting from the clean gash left in it. The creature toppled over. It seemed I'd found myself with yet another OP weapon in my arsenal. I wasted no time taking out the other treants, slicing through them like butter and gathering their corpses in the magic bag. Until I mistakenly struck a plain tree, but the bark was practically unharmed.

"Now that's somethin'," Dhoran remarked.

Treants were nothing, but regular old plants were too much? I cast Heal on the scuffed tree.

The dwarf closed his eyes and started to murmur, "A weapon that only works on monsters is a shoddy weapon, but the power... But then again..."

I slashed a nearby treant. "Dhoran, I need you to focus. We're still in the middle of a fight."

I glanced around. The elves were already on their knees and gasping, their magic having run dry. Lionel and Ketty danced around the battlefield with their usual fearless grins. We'd thinned a significant amount of the swarm.

“Let’s start regrouping,” I said to Dhoran. “It’s time to pull back.”

I purified a path free of monsters and began to clear the corpses.

“Finish up, you two! We’re leaving the forest once the area’s secure!” I shouted at the warrior and his pouncing counterpart.

They grew more savage so as not to allow a single one of their prey to escape. The monsters started to flee in fear.

“Those guys freak me out.”

I continued gathering remains and purifying until I felt magical exhaustion knocking for the first time in ages. Afterwards, we headed for the forest’s outskirts for a breather.

“Mister Luciel, is something the matter?” Milphene asked.

“Just thinking about something,” I muttered. “Kefin, this forest *is* untouched, right?”

“Far as I know,” he replied.

“And Lionel, did you notice any rare monsters at all?” I had never seen goblins or orcs before, so I had no frame of reference.

He rubbed his slightly overgrown beard and thought for a moment. “I suppose trolls and mandrakes could be considered uncommon. They only appear in places with particularly dense miasma.”

Then my hunch was right. “I don’t know; maybe it’s because we weren’t in very deep, but I’m starting to doubt the council’s claims. What if there *aren’t* any rare monsters here? We’d be called frauds if we tried to attract adventurers with something like that.”

“I think it would depend on your phrasing, but yes, I don’t see much profit to be made here.”

Not when the alternative was hunting magic stones in labyrinths. It couldn’t compare.

“We need to do some digging at the Adventurer’s Guild when we get back.”

Goldhus and Jeiyas couldn't refuse me.

"That may be wise."

We kept marching. Kefin's men had used these woods to train and level up when they were young, but Dolstar, the head honcho of their organization and the slums, had forbidden them from entering it once their fundamentals were down. The remainder of their training had been conducted in the labyrinth's easier floors. Dolstar maintained that the forest was dangerous, because those who ventured too far never returned. Not even the best adventurers.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the elves fidgeting and looking behind us.

"What's wrong?"

"Something feels..." Lycian hesitated. "It feels like something's pulling us back."

"Is it spirits?"

"Not quite. It's sad, almost. The farther away we get, the tighter my chest gets," Milphene said.

"I feel it too," Creia added. "This has never happened to me before."

All three of them looked back together. I glanced at Lionel and the others, but none of us sensed what they did. Still, elves were people of nature. If the forest was speaking to them, it wouldn't be all that smart to ignore it.

"There's more to this forest than meets the eye, huh? First things first, though. You're all exhausted, so let's rest for now."

The elves nodded, and not long after, we exited the forest.

"Kefin, you and your team swap with Yulbo once you're rested." Their faces went pale. "Relax, you're not in trouble. This is part of the plan."

Kefin's team brightened and responded, "Understood."

"Milphene, whatever's in those woods, I need you all to stay on top of it, so recuperate while you can."

“Yes, sir.”

“Pola and Dhoran, I know you want more magic stones. Help me butcher the corpses.”

“Aye!”

Pola silently, yet very enthusiastically, nodded. I felt Lycian’s cold stare but chose to ignore it.

“Oh, Lionel and Ketty, let loose on Kefin and his men.”

“That we will.”

Ketty grinned from ear to ear. “I was hopin’ you’d say that. I’ve got a few *pointers* to give.”

Later, I was taking inventory while Dhoran and Pola got to taking apart the monster corpses. We’d collected about a hundred and twenty trees before the attack, and thirteen treants during it. Good progress for two hours of work, but we could’ve made even more if not for the ambush. Although, maybe that was asking for too much. At least we’d all gotten out safe.

I looked over and saw Dhoran tossing goblins and trolls, freshly relieved of their magic gems, into a large hole. He noticed me watching.

“Lots o’ wind-and water-type stones. Plenty o’ neutrals too,” he reported.

“Looks like a windfall for you crafters, then. I’m not so sure about just tossing all the rotten corpses into a hole, though.”

Pola smiled at the pile of gems. “Bonus. Nice.”

“Excuse me, those aren’t all for you,” Lycian fumed.

“Says who?”

“Last I checked, you didn’t slay that entire swarm by yourself!”

Pola rolled her eyes and reluctantly handed her a single, miserable stone.

The elf gaped. “You’ve got to be kidding me. What am I supposed to do with this?” She started to march towards the mountain of gems, but Pola stood in her way and spread her arms out, guarding her hoard like a dragon. “What is the matter with you?! I’m clearly the better artificer!”

“You wish.”

Sparks flew, and I was having none of it. I left the splash zone and returned to handling corpses with Dhoran.

“We sure got a lot,” I commented.

“Aye, a happy accident, I’d say it was. And a lot of ’em don’t need much butcherin’.”

“In that case, I’ll leave you to it.”

“Make today’s lunch heavy on the meat, if you don’t mind.”

“Will do. Hey!” I called out to everyone. “We’re gonna have an early lunch! Barbecue!”

Cheers rang out. We’d skipped breakfast, so they must’ve been starving.

I purified some edible monster meat, stewed it in water, and threw in some spices I had on hand. Even an elf wasn’t able to resist this recipe. I chopped up some vegetables into chunks, then skewered everything on some spits I’d had Dhoran make, and roasted them. The rest of the meat sat on a grill, but not for long. The party devoured everything so fast that I had to pull out the extra food before I got to eat.

Time flew, and before we knew it, we were all fed, recovered, and ready. I offered to let the elves rest a while longer in the carriage, given they’d been flat out of magic, but my worries were for nothing. They refused and were raring to go.

“All right, but take it easy.”

“Of course,” they assured me.

“Boss, Pola and I have work we wanna do,” Dhoran said. “Mind if we stay back?”

Being two heavy hitters down would hurt our efficiency, but then again, Lionel and Ketty could easily pick up the slack.

“All right. Just keep the theatrics to a minimum.”

“Aye.”

We stepped into the forest once more.

02 — A Tragedy Foretold

Our resumed mission proceeded smoothly and without any untimely interruptions. Only the creak of splitting bark and the boom of trunks against earth resounded this time. No ear-splitting shrieks.

“No monsters. It must’ve been the mandrake’s scream that drew them all.”

“It’s likely,” Lycian replied.

“Do you still have that feeling? Is it a voice?”

“Something like that. But it’s faint. I can’t pin it down.”

I looked at Milphene and Creia. They shook their heads.

“No problem. Just stay focused and update us on which trees we can knock down.”

“Understood.”

Eventually, we made it back to the scene of our previous battle. But there was a small problem.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. “Okay, these weren’t here last time, right?”

“The sprites could be toying with us,” Lionel said.

“Stop theorizing and let’s get out of here, maybe?” Ketty insisted.

Planted in the ground were a dozen or more mandrakes that had appeared out of nowhere. I was a little nonplussed, to say the least. Their placement almost seemed purposeful. Ketty was especially adamant about leaving, no doubt because her enhanced hearing made those shrieks excruciating. Thankfully, I had a way to deal with them now.

“Don’t worry, Ketty. Mandrakes are only plants, so I should be able to stuff them in my magic bag.”

“Huh?” She tilted her head. “I thought you couldn’t put living things in there.”

“I’m assuming it should be fine, because they’re technically medicinal herbs. If not, I can use Sanctuary Circle as a last resort.”

“Uh, good luck with that, I guess.”

I told everyone to stay back and to grab me and run if things went south, then stepped forward.

“Here goes nothing.”

I touched the plant and willed it into the bag, and in it went.

“Well, that was anticlimactic.”

Things went smoothly from there. Shortly after, the mandrakes were disposed of, and I turned back around.

“It’s safe, everyone!”

Ketty and the other beastpeople looked relieved, but the elves were far from it. They silently stared past me into the forest, mouths wide.

“Is something there?” I followed their gaze but saw nothing.

“It’s...” Lycian stammered. “It’s a sprite. And a noble one at that.”

“A leshy—guides of the forest,” Milphene finally explained. “But why? I’ve only known them to appear in the Lost Woods.”

“I’ve never seen a sprite before. He’s awfully big,” Creia commented.

“It wants us to follow,” Lycian said.

“It says, ‘Although your wit is wily, your strength is true. We are grateful to you, one who brings those who see.’”

I almost couldn’t believe them. I looked at Lionel and Ketty, but they were just as stumped. Spirits and magic were very real, so fairies and sprites were hardly implausible, but the sprites I knew were the ones in fairy tales who liked to cause mischief and make your day terrible. Regardless, one was, apparently, speaking to us, and only Milphene and Lycian could see it.

We were about to get dragged into some nonsense again, weren’t we?

“Maybe it’ll lead us to what’s been calling us,” I murmured. “Okay, I’m not sold on this, but I get the feeling we’re not getting out of the forest unless we listen. Everyone, stay on your guard.”

“Understood.”

The elves took the lead and guided us, supposedly being escorted themselves by this leshy thing. The trees and plants began to morph around us into a hidden pathway that led somewhere beyond our reach. We found no monsters on the way. Gradually, the chirping of birds and buzzing of insects faded, leaving only the rustle of leaves in the wind. My heart leapt. It was utterly fantastical.

“We’re here,” Lycian announced.

“We’ve been told to wait. The leshy’s gone.”

“It’s beautiful,” Creia breathed.

A tranquil spring glistened in the few rays of light that made it past the canopy, its waters calm and clear like glass. The air was crisp, refreshing, almost rejuvenating. No amount of film with any camera would have been enough to capture the beauty of the scene. In fact, assuming this place was free of monsters, it wouldn’t have made a bad home. Mental note for the future.

“Something tells me we should stay put,” Ketty said apprehensively.

“I agree,” Lionel replied. “Forest pixies are known to confuse and mislead travelers.”

I nodded. Unlike me, some of us were actually paying attention. I stopped staring at the water and took in my surroundings.

Several minutes later, the elves suddenly bowed before the spring.

“Whoa, hey, what’s going on?”

The women didn’t answer. Their lips moved, but no sound came out, like it was being absorbed into the water.

“Should we have brought Dhoran and Pola?” I asked Lionel. They could hear spirits too, after all.

“They wouldn’t fare much better than us. Voices are all they can perceive of spirits.”

“And it didn’t seem like they played nice with the ones the elves worship,” Ketty added.

At least my decision hadn't been the wrong one. I was watching the ladies who remained bowed over the spring when a voice echoed inside my head.

"Human, blessed one of the dragons, you arrive too soon."

The speaker remained invisible, and I seemed to be the only one receiving its message. I guessed, based on the elves' behavior, that I was speaking with a spirit.

"What do you mean 'too soon'? I didn't arrive anywhere. We were *brought* here. And who are you? A spirit?"

Everyone (aside from the elves, that is) looked at me like I was crazy. I must have sounded the part. But I felt compelled. I couldn't be distracted, not for a moment.

"You will understand in time. I am known as the Spirit of Tides."

"Okay, Spirit of Tides, it sounds like you're saying I'll be back here again at some point."

"So long as you never surrender."

"What? What might make me give up? What does that mean?"

I couldn't make heads or tails of any of this. The spirit spoke in riddles, like it was dodging my questions. Would answering them change my future? Or make it even worse?

"Should the time come that you return to this land, we will meet again."

What in the world was it prophesying? Was something going to happen to me? Why couldn't it just tell me what it saw?

"Should the time come'?"

"And it shall, if your will to defy fate weathers the storm."

Something was going to happen to me. I didn't know what. I didn't know when. But there was no getting away from it, apparently.

"I don't understand what any of this means. What am I supposed to do? Can't you just answer me?"

But no answer came. The elves had stood up and were peering at me.

“Are you okay?” Creia asked.

I stayed silent for a time, then finally said, “I’m not sure. But one thing is: I’m not going to get to live a peaceful life anytime soon.”

Ketty grinned. “So, business as usual!”

I felt the weight lighten and broke into a smile. She wasn’t wrong there. “You’ve got a point.”

“It’s why we follow you,” Lionel boomed.

“You guys are gonna have your work cut out for you.”

Ignoring the innate problem with this being the norm, I had to remind myself that worrying about every little thing that could go wrong would only wear me down. Lionel and Ketty had become a strong foundation for me, and their constant presence and reliability were comforting.

“Mister Luciel,” Milphene interjected, “deep in the forest is the country of elves, we’re told.”

“But it’s too soon for you to be there,” Lycian followed.

The country of elves. And there was that foreboding “too soon” again.

“Hey, why is Creia crying?”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. “The spirit told me that my life wasn’t a mistake,” she sniffed. “It said that a human and an elf can only have a child through true love.”

And then she smiled. Her life as a halfling, much like Kefin’s, must have been a hard one, filled with suffering. But the Spirit of Tides had washed away her pain.

“I’m happy for you. And rest assured, none of us will ever belittle you for your heritage. But if that’s not enough, I’ll help change things however I can. Even if it means showing the world that you’re not halflings, but twinbloods.”

“Thank... Thank you, sir.”

With renewed passion in all our hearts, I decided we ought to head back for the day. It had been a mentally draining few hours.

“So, which way is the way out of here?”

“That path leads where we came,” Lycian explained. “But this direction leads to the colony of the vespians, it seems. The great spirit asked us to go there first.”

Vespi-what?

“They’re a people who subsist on nectar from flowers and trees,” Milphene clarified, noticing my confusion. “The great spirit tells us your relationship could be mutually beneficial.”

All right, “great spirit,” I’ll play your game. I put aside the matter of my future and realized that this was my chance to make good on one of the promises I’d made to one of Yenice’s races. As long as these vespians were as bee-like as I expected, that is. But why hadn’t the spirit told me itself?

“The sun’s about to go down, so I say we handle that tomorrow,” I said. “But if this is our last chance to come here, we’ll need to split up and send half back to Kefin. Can we get back to this spring without a guide?”

If the elves deemed splitting up safe, then it couldn’t be that dangerous. I would’ve liked for all of us to go, but an armed platoon didn’t seem like the wisest welcoming party when meeting new people.

Milphene stepped forward. “Unfortunately, that’s impossible.”

Creia stared at her, taken aback for some reason. Whatever miscommunication was happening here, I needed to get to the bottom of it later.

At any rate, I had to consider who to send back. At least one elf to guide them, of course. But who to trust with bodyguard duty? I didn’t want to divide our strength too severely, but there wasn’t much choice afforded to me in this case.

“Ketty, Lycian, Creia, you head back. Team Yulbo, you too.” I handed a magic bag to Ketty. “This has camping supplies in it, just in case. You’re in charge.”

“Aww, I’m gonna be a lonely kitty!”

“Save it. You and Lionel are the best we have, so this is the safest option for both groups.”

“Oh, all right. Done!”

“If we’re not back by tomorrow afternoon, head to town and move forward with the plan without us. Everyone got that?”

“Understood!” they cried.

Ketty and her group departed, leaving only me, Lionel, and Milphene to push on.

“So what’s this about the vespians? Why do we need to go there so urgently?” I asked.

Lionel pointed his sword at Milphene. “What did the spirit say to you?”

She was under a slave binding, but that didn’t forbid her from lying. I’d only ordered her not to bring harm to me or the Church, and after Creia’s look of surprise upon hearing Milphene’s claims, it was clear that she was hiding something. It was practically all over her face. The blade seemed rather convincing.

“It’s okay, Lionel. Tell me what the Spirit of Tides said, Milphene.”

She stayed quiet for a while, frozen in shock. “There’s no hiding it anymore, I suppose. I’m sorry. The truth is, the vespians are in danger. Miasma’s overrun their colony, and they’ll be destroyed in only a few days at this rate. The great spirit thought—no, *knew*—that you would be able to save them.”

“And I bet it also knew that I’d refuse if it asked me directly, is that it?”

“Yes. I was sworn to secrecy, but, well...”

“That explains things, I guess.” I sighed. “I’ll have to get Ketty and Nalia to whip something up for the three of you for lying. Am I really that unreliable? You couldn’t have been upfront with me? Excuse me, Lionel, what’s your deal?”

His eyes shone with excitement. “Miasma means strong opponents.”

“Stop foreshadowing things. We’ll clear the place out, make some deals with the natives, then we’re out of there. Milphene, lead the way.”

The prospect of fearsome foes had flipped Lionel’s switch from imposing guard to giddy meathead. For my part, I was concerned about the kinds of

monsters that could potentially destroy an entire people in “only a few days.” Still, all it would take was some cleansing magic to clear the miasma that had spawned them in the first place, so it couldn’t be too bad.

“You’re too kind, Mister Luciel.” The elf bowed, then took the lead.

Lionel and I carefully followed, and in about ten minutes, we had arrived. It was a little hard to miss, what with several enormous beehives hanging from the trees. But where were the vespians? All that occupied the colony was a thick, unpleasant mist. Miasma.

“Doesn’t look good,” I commented.

“No,” Lionel agreed. “Something is—”

Milphene stepped towards us, scowling. “Sirs, can you kindly save the commentary for later?”

Couldn’t argue there. “Er, right. I’ll start purifying. Lionel, watch my back.”

“With my life.”

The haze immediately began to thin, but not entirely. It didn’t matter how much I cast. It would clear up for a moment, then return just as quickly, as if the village itself were exhaling it.

“It seems we need to find the source or you’ll only exhaust yourself,” Lionel said, sharing my suspicions. But unless we knew where this source was, we were looking for a needle in a haystack.

“Milphene, can you ask the spirits or sprites where the miasma’s coming from?”

She shook her head. “They’d never stray close to miasma this dense.”

The stuff weakened spirit magic too, as a matter of fact. Come to think of it, the elf was looking dangerously pale. This intense fog was bad news all around, apparently. I pulled out my old Church robe from the magic bag.

“Sorry, I should’ve remembered this earlier. Put it on. It should help.”

She did so. “Thank you.”

“Lionel, stay with me,” I ordered.

“As always,” my bodyguard grinned.

“Milphene, find somewhere less dense, and locate any vespians you can. Once you do, shout for us.”

Milphene lowered her head. “Understood. I’ll find you as soon as I have any information.”

Keeping the miasma, and by extension the monsters, back was pretty much all I could do in the way of protecting her. We had to get rid of whatever was pumping the stuff out in the first place.

I checked the ground first to see if the toxic air was rising up like steam, but found nothing, which left me two theories: the trees or the clouds. So we set off, following the fog to its most concentrated area as I continued to cast Purification.

We didn’t need to walk for long. Lionel grunted and swung his flaming greatsword in a wide arc.

“What... What is this thing? A monster?”

“It’s a sign the fun has finally begun.”

The soldier fortified his shield and gripped his sword. Translation: danger was coming.



The thing he'd just cut down was a giant, almost dog-sized, green fly, undead with half its body melted.

"You're the only one who finds this— Get back!"

I cast Area Barrier, then Purification in quick succession at the monsters leaping at us. Behind the fallen creatures was their progenitor: an enormous slime.

"That's what slimes look like? Where's the smiley face? It's like a final boss or something. Lionel, don't let me die, okay? *Okay?*"

"Never fret; I'll strike them all down. I don't fear the undead, but they will come to fear me. Come! Let us do... I mean, I will be your shield, Luciel!"

What was that? "Let us do battle"? Seriously? Thank goodness he'd remembered we were alone and didn't charge in as usual.

"They're probably going to go for me now that I've used magic. Keep them away."

"Yes, sir!"

More and more monsters emerged, writhing, from the mass, but their undead forms were no match for Purification. Eventually, their spawn rate started to drop. My spells were having an effect and the slime was...*not* shrinking?!

"Come on, that's not how this is supposed to work! Slimes are supposed to get smaller!"

The slime expelled a mist of miasma, then immediately reabsorbed it like a form of auto-photosynthesis. It was growing, slowly but steadily. The speed at which it was birthing monsters had definitely slowed, but that was no thanks to my efforts because the few it did spit out were getting stronger.

Lionel seemed to be having fun, at least. My MP and I, on the other hand, couldn't withstand an endless battle. I decided it was all or nothing.

"Hold them back for just a little bit!" I shouted. Without waiting for a reply, I focused my magic into the Illusion Staff and chanted, "*Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Take my energy and shield me in ramparts of angelic light. Engulf impurity in a bastion of radiance. Sanctuary Circle!*"

A magic ring formed around the slime, and the monsters took notice. They all charged me at once, but for some reason, I didn't care. No, I had faith in Lionel; that was why. Plus, what was a flesh wound here or there? I could heal anything.

I set the spell loose and the pillar of light exploded, but this time the pale blue light wasn't alone. A crimson vortex swirled within the radiance, enveloping the gelatinous beast. Lionel hadn't allowed a single monster to scratch me, at great cost to himself.

"How reckless can you be? *Recover! Dispel! Extra Heal!*"

He chuckled. "My thanks. I couldn't contain myself."

One of his eyes had been ruptured and patches of petrification and poison littered his skin in a mosaic of gray and purple. Thank God for my magic.

I cast Purification on the remaining monsters. "I appreciate you not letting me die like I asked, but that doesn't mean I want *you* dying instead."

"Kind words for a thrall like me."

"You're not helping."

Lionel laughed again, glancing at where the slime had been.

"That's a lot of monster corpses," I continued. "Hey, look at the mist."

"The miasma is thinning."

It seemed we'd found our source.

"Also, the slime is looking a little...anthropomorphic now."

"What a coincidence. I was thinking the same thing."

Since the mountain of bodies needed tending to first, I stashed them all in my bag, cleansed the remaining miasma, and returned my attention to the new issue.

"*Purification! Dispel! Recover! High Heal!*"

A woman(?) lay where the slime had been moments before. A very bee-like woman of only half a meter in height.

“Your Highness!”

I turned around to see a crowd of bees flying our way. One of the older(?) ones with a beard (that was a beard, right?) approached me.

“Sir Sage! Oh, is she all right? Is our queen well?”

“Um, you mean her? She’ll be fine. Wait, what did you call me?”

“Our queen lives, everyone! Carry her to the hive!” he called out. “If you’ll excuse us, Sir Sage.”

“O-Oh. Sorry. Go ahead.”

“You have our gratitude.”

Several small bees, about twenty centimeters in length, carefully grabbed the so-called queen, then flew her off towards the largest nest. But could we pause for a moment on that “Sir Sage” thing?

“Mister Luciel, Lionel, you’re safe.” Milphene found us, then promptly dropped to her knees and lowered her head. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of any help.”

Elves prostrated themselves too? It wasn’t just the Yenitians?

“What’s this about? Why are you on the ground?” I asked.

“Because I’ve done wrong by you. My slave’s crest is gone.”

Gone? How could she have done that by herself?

“The great spirit removed it and instructed me to save these people,” she continued. “But I never imagined something so ferocious could have been waiting for you. I’m truly sorry.”

Who knew spirits had that power? Well, *I* had that power, so I suppose it stood to reason that divine beings did too. I didn’t particularly mind whether she had the crest or not, as long as she didn’t blab the guild’s secrets to the world, and the spirit *had* forced her hand in the name of saving others. But if we didn’t make it out of this with something to show for it, I was going to have a few words with that water spirit. What was with the great entities of this world and their tendency to be incredibly inconsiderate? First the dragons, and now

this. I'd had it up to here. At least we were all alive.

"So, what were you hoping to get out of it? Freedom?"

That couldn't have been right. They'd had that option from the beginning and never chosen it. But what was it, then? She had to have been offered something. Lionel or Ketty would have noticed if she'd had bad intentions. This didn't add up.

Milphene pulled out a slip of paper. "The Spirit of Tides asked me to give you this talisman once the vespians were safe."

Let me guess, she'd gotten *nothing* out of this and had been moved purely by her fervent devotion to the great spirits. Once ordered, she simply couldn't refuse. Classic development.

She offered me the talisman, her head about as low as could get.

I sighed. "So, what's it going to be? Do you want to leave or be a slave again? Think carefully, because you'll have to be punished if you choose slavery. You listening? I know you're there, water spirit."

"Show mercy on the girl." Ah-ha, there it was. *"My power to unbind extends only to those with extraordinary faith."*

I looked up at the sky. "And I suppose asking me yourself wasn't an option?"

"Had I done so, you would have marched on the colony with all of your companions. You would have become deranged and slaughtered each other."

I started to talk back but bit my tongue. True, if Lionel alone had taken that much of a beating, more people would have meant more casualties. That said, I would've liked...I don't know...a bare minimum of information. Like what we'd be up against.

"Okay, sure, but what's this talisman?"

Ping.

Obtained Protection of the Spirit of Tides

Really? Seriously? They were just handing these things out, huh?

"And what is this, might I ask?"

"I can not appoint those without my blessing. You have earned it, though indirectly, by accomplishing this task. Its effects will become clear to you once the Water Dragon's powers are yours."

The spirit almost sounded amused. Unfortunately, I was not. They always ignored me and left out the most important details. Always. There was probably more to this than I was being told.

"And the talisman?"

"It will make it so you never lose your way in these woods. Do not lose it."

"You said I was here too soon. Am I coming back? When?"

"I cannot say, but the time will come when you know despair. If your spirit survives and you find the strength to stand once more, you will return."

Despair? The strength to stand? Its cryptic warnings echoed in my head without end.

"What does that mean? What do you mean 'despair'? Hey! We're not done yet!"

I continued to shout, but the spirit never replied. It had shown up, spouted ominous warnings, and then just...left. I figured I should be prepared for the worst.

"Sir, we ought to make a decision before the sun sets," Lionel said. "Do we enter the vespian colony or return to the others?"

"Right. Milphene, have you made up your mind?"

"I want to be your servant again, if you'll allow me," she replied.

"I figured. You probably have your reasons. Just be prepared for the consequences of all this."

The matter of trust aside, I still had a mountain of things I wanted her and the other elves' help with.

"Of course."

Lionel grinned. "Servitude under Luciel doesn't quite feel like servitude, does it? It makes slavehood rather convenient at times."

“Just, please no more hiding any mandates from heaven, okay?” I groaned. Beauty did not absolve one from a round of Substance X. *Don’t test me.*

“Yes, sir.”

The newly reinstated slave smiled in relief, and I sighed for what seemed like the millionth time that day. Then we set off for the largest-looking hive in the colony while I mulled over the coming negotiations.

03 — The Sage's Prophecy

With the miasmic fog having dissipated, the vespians were slowly making their way out of their dangling homes.

“That stuff must be pretty poisonous without the right resistance,” I muttered to myself.

Suddenly, a swarm of them flew towards us, a few leading the pack, including the older one who'd called me “Sir Sage.” I think?

“Thank you for saving our village and queen, Sir Sage,” he said.

“Without you, we'd have lost our homes!” another remarked.

“We owe you our lives.”

“I'm just glad I could help,” I said. “But why do you keep calling me ‘Sage’?”

The vespians looked at each other, puzzled.

“The story goes that a long time ago, when a fog of miasma had covered the forest, a powerful sage appeared and rescued us with a brilliant flash of light. And then, should the fog ever come back, he said that he or his successor would return at our most dire hour.” The vespian stared at me. “You appeared, there was a brilliant flash of light, and the miasma is gone, just like the prophecy said. Are you not Sir Sage?”

How heroic of you, Sir Sage, you son of a...

So I was second fiddle to a complete stranger, was I? I couldn't believe it.

“Unfortunately not. I'm just a plain old healer-in-training. I came to negotiate with your people, but I take it your queen isn't in a state to talk right now, is she?”

“Oh? In that case, I'll bring Prince Honeur,” the elder said, flying off to one of the nests.

“So, why was your queen in that thing?” I asked. “And why didn't you all leave

the forest if things were that bad?”

“We would never abandon Her Highness!” a young vespian cried. “It’s unthinkable. We’d never entertain the thought.”

The others raised their voices in a passionate clamor, singing the praises of their beloved ruler. Just when I thought they’d never stop...

“That’s enough.”

A commanding tone cut through the pandemonium. The queen appeared at its source, accompanied by the elder and a young, yet noticeably larger, vespian. The crowd immediately parted and made way for Her Grace.

“You have my thanks for rescuing my people, Sir Sage.”

She lowered her head, her wings shimmering with a distinct kind of magical energy.



“I’m glad things worked out.”

“I hear you want to negotiate? What about, I wonder?”

“To my understanding, your people make and produce honey. Is that correct?”

“Yes, you...have the right of it.”

Shoot, I’d gotten ahead of myself and forgotten step one to all business dealings. I had to recover from this ASAP. First, explain your purpose.

“You see, I have a plan. And it starts beneath the City of Freedom...”

I went on to explain my entire scheme, concluding with a plea for the vespians’ cooperation.

“This is an intriguing idea, to be sure. However, as indebted to you as we are, this isn’t something I can offer an answer to immediately.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

You had to see it to believe it, really. An underground world? Even I wasn’t naive enough to expect someone to go along with such an absurd concept without a second thought.

“Instead, I will have my son, Honeur, bring several retainers to judge the situation for themselves. If you’ll have them.”

“Wait, you mean...”

“I don’t think you’re a liar, Sir Sage. If what you say is indeed true, and I hope it is, we will gladly join your venture.”

I couldn’t stop myself from grinning. “Thank you for giving me a chance.”

I’d never thought she would have that much faith in me, to be honest. I’d already been considering gifts or other ways to earn their favor, but this changed things. Boy, did it change things. With the vespians in on my underground orchard plan, the ursans were in the bag too.

“You have a unique way of thinking, Sir Sage.”

“Do I?”

“You do. Most humans strike me as brash and prideful, but you surprised me.”

The vespians probably didn't have the best history with my kind. That was something I ought to look into.

“Apologies for changing the subject, Your Highness, but I'm curious about that slime. Were you incorporated into it or just stuck inside?”

“Well, it happened nearly half a month ago. At daybreak. A wyvern was flying overhead when it seemed to hurl something down at us.”

“Then someone had to have been riding it.”

“I suspect as much myself. The wyvern then flew north, and the younglings went to investigate the scene. There, they found a mysterious broken jar and the slime, ejecting miasma.”

Half a month ago. That was right around the time I had left for the labyrinth.

“Physical attacks had no effect, and its core, its one weakness, blended into the mass,” she continued. “I'm the only one capable of wielding magic, you see, so I tried using wind spells, but the monster suddenly sprang at me. The rest is a blur.”

“We tried fire next,” the elder continued, “but the fiend used Her Highness as a shield to protect itself.”

It was intelligent? Or could it have been some sort of self-defense instinct? I looked at Lionel, but, strangely, he was too focused to notice me.

“It kept growing and growing, attracting monsters with its miasma then swallowing them up. Just yesterday, it started spitting out undead creatures. All we could do was pray to the great spirits that the prophecy would come true.”

Not to the gods, but the spirits. Well, they were probably one and the same to some people in this world. And this sage guy sounded like another one of the reincarnated, so I had to remember to look into him. Er, after this. Focus, Luciel.

“And that's when we showed up,” I said. “I'm surprised the monster's ooze didn't melt you, Your Highness. The creatures we fought were disfigured, so it's good you made it out safely.”

“I would not have without this.” The queen revealed a familiar charm.

“What is it?”

“A talisman from the Spirit of Tides. It’s been passed down, from one queen to another, for generations.”

Her voice was lifeless. She gently traced the charm, holding it to her body, and it slowly began to fade. All the spirit had wanted was to save its devoted followers, to answer their prayers. Maybe the spirits were more human than I gave them credit for.

“Oh...”

And then the treasured heirloom was gone. A deity had only wanted to protect its believers. Plus, had the slime been left alone, it could have gotten big enough to be a danger to all of Yenice. When I thought about the situation in a positive light, we had not only averted that crisis, but saved the vespians and even made a deal with them. All’s well that ends well, as always, thanks to Monsieur Luck.

I didn’t even want to think about how bad it would’ve been if the slime had gotten large enough to cover the entire forest in miasma. Our hopes of attracting adventurers would’ve gone up in flames. The Adventurer’s Guild would want to hear about this incident, minus the spirit business. Not that I’d forgotten about it, oh no. The Spirit of Tides wasn’t out of the woods yet.

I felt a little calmer.

“Will you be staying with us?” the queen asked.

I looked up at the precariously dangling hives. Yeah, no. I was not brave enough to test those waters.

I smiled. “We actually have others waiting for us, so I have to refuse. Thank you for the offer, though.”

“That is unfortunate. All the same, please take these as thanks for what you’ve done for us.” She turned to her attendants, who presented us with a small, hefty barrel and a yellow crystal roughly the size of a baseball. “The barrel contains honey. Fill another of the same size with water, then place the

crystalized honey inside and leave it overnight. The next morning, you will have a delicious mead.”

That sounded like a nifty way to make alcohol and a nice gift for Her Holiness.

“Thank you very much. Now, when should we come back to get Prince Honeur and his people?”

“Actually, we would like to go with you today, if it’s not too much trouble,” the prince replied. His attendants bowed.

“Not at all, but are you sure?”

“Of course. I’m very excited to see the outside world.”

They were certainly prepared. That settled it, then.

“All right. We’ll treat your son and his attendants well, Your Highness. You have my word that they’ll join us on our periodic visits.”

“I wish you the best.”

And with that, we left the vespian colony.

We exited the forest not ten minutes after leaving the queen. The rest of the team awaiting us stared at the new arrivals with confusion.

“The colony’s closer than I thought.”

“The sprites of the forest confuse and mislead visitors. The Spirit of Tides also maintains a barrier,” Honeur explained. But should he have? That sounded important.

“So it’s true that you might never make it back if you stray too far.”

“That’s right. It’s no real secret.”

He’d read my mind. People seemed to do that a lot with me.

Ketty wrapped up her conversation with Lionel and came over. “Nothin’ to report.”

“Good. We had a bit of a rough time, but some good came of it, at least.”

Ketty glanced at Lionel, then shot a glare at Milphene, but I held up a hand

between the two.

“It’s fine, Ketty. She wasn’t trying to stab anyone in the back, so go easy on her.”

“Sure.”

I gestured to the bee-like people who had joined us. “These are the vespians. They’re going to play an important role in the plan, hopefully, but for now, they’re here to observe.”

“My name is Honeur of the vespians who Sir Sage so gallantly saved. I hope your ideas turn out as promising as they sound.”

My team bowed politely in greeting.

“Let me introduce you to everyone,” I said. “This is my team. Well, technically, they’re my slaves, but I consider them a retinue, if you will. My companions.”

“Slaves?” Honeur tilted his head. “Ah, my apologies. I was just surprised. I never would have guessed.”

“I know. I’m not particularly fond of it, personally, and I wish they’d let me free them already.”

“He treats us well, so we protect him with our lives. He has our loyalty,” Lionel said proudly.

“How gallant. Just like Sir Sage.”

“Right...” I trailed off. “Anyway, I want you all to keep the vespians safe from now on.”

“Understood!” they cried.

It was still quite a distance back to Yenice, so we decided to have a small dinner before setting out. By the time we finished, the sunset had tinged the sky a beautiful orange. If only we’d been able to camp out for the night... But I didn’t feel comfortable leaving Yenice unattended.

“Stay alert, everyone. It’s going to get dark soon.”

“Understood!”

I cast a precautionary Area Barrier, and then we were off.

The sun had sunk below the horizon, and we were taking a short break. We used the opportunity to install a magic light onto the wagon, which I had asked Pola to make to help us spot enemies from a distance. Streetlamps didn't exist in this world, so I'd had it made a while back just in case. And this was one such case. You can never be too prepared. The downside was that it also made us stand out, but that still beat getting jumped in the dark out of nowhere. It might have been redundant in a world where you could sense people and magic, and others could flat out see in the dark, but not all of us were so lucky.

Pola went about attaching the light, boasting to Lycian all the while about how amazing her creation was. Lycian, of course, didn't take this sitting down and continued to insist that she, in fact, was the better artificer. Dhoran, meanwhile, looked on with a smile.

Our path now illuminated, the journey back to town was an easy one. But as we neared our destination, Lionel tensed up and warned us to be on our guard.

"Fortunately, they seem to only be watching from a distance."

"That's good. Who do you think they are? Council protestors or insurgents?"

Dolstar had warned me about a group of people who weren't very happy with my place in the government. And on top of that, there had been bandits popping up in defiance of the establishment itself.

"I see 'em. Centaur," Ketty reported. "There's a monster too."

"Are they fighting? Should we step in?"

"Don't think so. Looks like they're hunting."

"I guess that's fine."

"They see us, but it doesn't seem like they're after us."

"Good. Let's hope it stays that way."

"Tonight will only be scouts," Lionel said. "We ought to prepare ourselves in case of attack on future excursions."

“Got it. Stay on guard, everyone. Remember, stay alive.”

“Understood.”

Soon after our foreboding encounter with Yenice’s dissident side, we made it back. Relief washed over me, but we weren’t out of the woods yet.

04 — Luciel's Subterranean Scheme

I immediately sent Kefin and his men to Dolstar to exchange intel and progress reports. The rest of us returned to the Healer's Guild, where everyone welcomed us back.

"Anything happen while we were out, Jord?"

"Nothing in particular. We've got more than enough staff, so things are running smoothly over here."

"Let me know if you guys need anything."

"Come to think of it, we've been running a bit short on junk food lately."

"All right, got it," I laughed. "I'll see what I can do."

"So, who're your friends?"

"The vespians. They'll be helping us with the plan."

"Vespians? You mean *those* vespians?! The honey kind?! They're famous!"

"You know them?"

"You *don't*?"

I definitely hadn't seen any mention of them during my studies in Merratoni. After introducing everyone and going over a few things, I dismissed them all except for Lionel. Team Yulbo left for the fourth floor of the basement, and Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian for the third. Verdel and his group were helping Nalia, while Ketty, Milphene, and Creia headed to the mess hall. Lionel, Honeur's entourage, and I descended to the first floor, where the vespians froze, gaping. Yeah, that reaction seemed about right.

"What do you think?" I asked. "This is our base of operations."

"I'm simply amazed. There's even a sun."

"I was the same when I first saw it. Never thought I'd see a sky downstairs. All five floors are artificially expanded, just like this one."

"I still can't bring myself to believe my eyes. The air, the water... With just a

few more plants, it would be no different than back in the forest.”

The prince’s attendants nodded in agreement.

“It’s good to see you’re impressed. And like I explained earlier, this building’s going to be my own private residence in the future, so you won’t have to worry about riff-raff coming and going.”

“This is incredible. Simply incredible. We’d be honored to join you in this plan of yours.”

“Thank you. The council’s already given me the license I need, so whether they like it or not, I’ll drag this city to prosperity kicking and screaming.”

The addition of the vespians altered things a little but for the better. With a few changes here and there, and the help of Dhoran, Pola, and the elves, things would really start to take off. Eventually, fields and orchards would stretch across the entirety of the slum district, right beneath their feet.

“Forgive me if I’m being insensitive to your people, but I was thinking about involving the ursans as well, for their knowledge in botany. Is that okay with you?” If not, we’d have to move forward without them. The vespians were too vital, and they were the only ones who knew the plan in its entirety, aside from Dolstar.

“Yes, of course. I hear they’re a very genial people.”

“Glad to hear it.”

I hadn’t seen any sugar beets, sugarcane, or other sucrose-rich plants in the book on flora I’d read in Merratoni. Based on my research, that was because Illumasia and Luburk had a monopoly on sugar production, and they made a killing off of exports. Everything from the means of production to where the stuff even came from was kept top secret.

Yenice’s exports, meanwhile, were getting beaten hard by local competition, according to Dolstar. Private cultivation of Yenice’s special spices and medicinal herbs drove the prices down, but the government wasn’t about to stop (not that they should have), so the future of the industry wasn’t looking very sustainable.

And that was where the ursans came in. With a bit of honey to sweeten the deal, I was sure they'd be on board before too long, and then we could use their knowledge to make Yenice a contender in the sugar trade.

"I do have one question," Honeur said. "Can you really make this space as large as you say?"

"Yes. We've already tested the water and are making progress. We expect it to take three months in total."

"I have no reason to distrust you at this point. Truly, placing our faith in you was the right decision!"

"Thank you for your kind words."

I had wanted a plan B and maybe even a plan C, but in all honesty, this was the only thing I could think of. Our new benefactors didn't need to know that, though.

In hindsight, I should have looked into interspecies relations beforehand. Actually, why hindsight? I could—and should—still do that. Interracial discrimination was what had spurred this plan in the first place, after all. Of course, that didn't mean I was giving out free lunches. I intended to bind everyone to contracts, so that anyone involved would forcibly lose consciousness and wake up with a craving for Substance X if they ever acted dishonestly (those intimidated or coerced would be spared the punishment). I wished it wasn't necessary, but people with power never reacted favorably to plots meant to even the playing field, so secrecy was crucial.

"So, you'll create gardens and flowerbeds, which we will use to produce honey. We'll have to discuss profit shares and the like later, but I am intrigued, sir."

My prospects were looking good. The queen had the final say, of course, but the prince's approval had to count for something.

"Does that mean we have your support? When do you think you would be able to begin?"

"I believe a test run is in order, first of all. We brought some flowers from the colony with us. Could we have them planted somewhere?"

He was more prepared than I thought. As long as this trial went without a hitch, we'd be on our way.

"Of course. We have very capable elves and dwarves who are familiar with the land, so they'll be able to help you."

However, I wasn't without my concerns. For one, there was the fact that spirits had the power to undo slave pacts. And as everything came to fruition, I wanted the others to grow attached to this place. I wanted them to be proud of what we were building and willing to continue working here of their own accord. To do that, I needed to develop a strong foundation.

I only had a year for my term on Yenice's council. After that, I couldn't even say if I'd still be in town. I needed someone like Jord, someone I could trust to leave everything to if I ended up going. And then there were the elves. Chances were they'd be staying behind, but before then, I needed to know if they were going to set out on their own or if they'd be willing to work at the guild. I'd already gotten the okay from the pope in case they tried to follow me when it came time to depart. Ultimately, it would be up to them, but I still hoped I would be able to build something they'd come to cherish too much to leave.

"Truthfully, there's something I was curious about, Sir Sage. That being why women of the forest are enslaved to you," the prince mused, interrupting my thoughts.

"Long story short, a slaver skipped town, and they're a few of the people he abandoned at his shop. They hadn't eaten or drank anything in days, so the Healer's Guild took them in. I freed them initially, but for whatever reason, they preferred being slaves. So they're staying with us for the time being."

"Then they're simply in your care."

"I imagine they wanted to go back to being slaves because they thought they owed me something and because I treat mine well. I'm hoping they'll get over it and be independent at some point."

I glanced at Lionel. He smirked back.

"I see. I have only one more question."

"Go ahead."

“Why didn’t you have the elf help you fight the slime?”

The prince seemed sincere, but I didn’t have much of an answer for him. “Hmm, that’s hard to say. I guess I wasn’t familiar with her fighting capabilities, and I’d also asked her to investigate before we found it. She would likely have been in the way in the battle.”

“But elves can use spirit magic. Couldn’t she have provided long-range support?”

“I suppose so, but like I said, I didn’t have a grasp on what she could do. At the time, Lionel’s first priority was protecting me, and if Milphene had been there, his attention would’ve been divided. In a fight, the slightest hesitation or lapse in judgment can mean death. Personally, I prefer to avoid fighting altogether, though.”

“It was trust that motivated you?”

“Exactly. Lionel may be a slave, but he’s always watching out for me. I trust him completely. I’d even unbind him, if he ever lets me.”

“I’ve not finished repaying my debt,” the man in question remarked, although he’d more than repaid it as far as I was concerned.

“It seems I shouldn’t judge you the same as the humans I’ve heard about in stories,” Honeur said. “Your people are harsh masters, I’m told. Ones who take joy in stripping the rights of others.”

We sure had a nasty reputation. Still, negative rumors tended to spread easier than good ones, and they always left a stronger impression. I didn’t intend to follow in the footsteps of past tradition.

“I can’t speak to how slaves are generally treated—it’s not like there’s a handbook or anything—but I, at least, will never understand how someone can find pleasure in making others eat scraps off the floor.”

“Oh?”

“Felons and criminals don’t get much sympathy from me, but I don’t think anyone becomes a slave because they want to. Most of the time it’s due to no fault of their own. So why would I want those who choose to help me, despite

all that, to hate life? I'd rather they be happy and motivated. Lionel says I spoil them."

If I ultimately did leave Yenice at the end of my term, Lionel and Ketty would most likely be the only two I brought with me. Until then, I needed to create something that would last, and I could rest easy with Jord in charge of it all. I'd cut my ties with the other slaves by freeing them, and then their fates would be in their own hands, but the most I could do was give them a nudge towards where I wanted them to go.

Honneur smiled. "You really are a sage, Sir Sage! Just like in the stories!"

I finished giving them the rundown on everything, and then we moved to the guildmaster's office, where we hammered out the details of scheduling, plants and flowers to cultivate, and the different kinds of fruit trees we could haul in from the forest.

*

Meanwhile, in the mess hall, Ketty had put Milphene and Creia on the spot.

"Are you aware of the danger you put both Sir Lionel *and* Luciel in, elf?"

"I am aware of the events that unfolded, yes," Milphene replied coolly, "and I'm very sorry about that. However, I only acted as the great spirit bid me to. I trusted it would be in Mister Luciel's best interest."

Ketty glared at her, then turned her cold stare to Creia.

"Eep! H-Have I done something wrong too?"

"Why didn't you say anything? Or Lycian, for that matter?"

"B-Because it was supposed to be in Mister Luciel's best interest!" she blurted fearfully.

"Who made that claim? The spirit?"

"Yes. We were told that Mister Luciel would be able to resolve things quickly and easily."

Nothing got past Ketty's gaze, but this time, at least, Creia didn't seem to be lying. However, the truth couldn't solve this problem.

“Quickly? *Easily*? Did you not hear how wounded Sir Lionel was?! Milphene, you’d better start talking. I want to hear everything.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.”

Milphene proceeded to recount everything that had happened in the vespian colony. Ketty listened quietly, slowly regretting her prior outburst.

It doesn’t sound like I could’ve been much help had I gone, she thought. Still, all this boils down to is that the Spirit of Tides put Sir Lionel’s life at risk, and I’m not about to let that slide.

Very few beastfolk cared enough to venerate the spirits, and Ketty was no exception, but she’d always known the role that faith played in people’s lives. It grounded them, kept them sane, gave them something to believe in. And she had never begrudged others for their beliefs. Until now.

“What do you plan on doing if this ever happens again? Blindly do as you’re told?”

Milphene said nothing, so Creia spoke up in her stead, “We can’t answer that question. I wish we could promise we would speak with the rest of you before acting, but all I can say is...we’ll try. As elves, we’ve grown up being taught that our memories are tied to our faith in the spirits. If it fades, so do our minds.”

Truthfully, Ketty didn’t really want an answer. She only wanted to plant the seeds so that they might think twice before obeying without question. She continued to stare down the two, eyeing them carefully. Her gut told her that Milphene was still hiding something.

“Fine. Milphene, you’re not technically a slave right now. What makes you want to work under Luciel so badly? With your talents, you’d make it just fine as an adventurer.”

The elf looked her in the eye. “Because I...still have a debt to repay.”

Ketty returned the gaze sharply. “And your spirits are fine with that, are they?”

“It’s a personal matter. They have nothing to do with it.”

Ketty thought she saw a hint of resolve in Milphene’s eyes. “Pray that it stays

that way,” she warned. “Your gods mean nothing to me, and I won’t ask you to abandon them, but know one thing: if it’s between my masters or the spirits, I will not hesitate. This will not happen again, and I will cut down anyone I must in order to keep it that way. If you don’t like that, take it up with the spirits.”

Then the cat-woman left without another word. No one said a thing until she was completely out of sight.

“I never knew Ketty could be so scary,” Creia said.

“Neither did I. I don’t think she was lying, though.”

“Y-You mean she’d really hurt us?”

Creia trembled, a side effect of the usually friendly and capricious Ketty’s frigid glare. But Milphene had it worse. Sending Luciel to the vespians’ aid wasn’t the only request made of her by the Spirit of Tides. She had been given a mission: to bring Luciel to the woman chosen by the Elemental, the spirit above all spirits, before the Drakesworn.

Sworn to secrecy and without help, Milphene felt tears well up in her eyes. All she could do was guide him to the Spiritsworn as best she could.

*

The next morning, I gave Dhoran and Pola all of the magic stones we’d procured and instructed them to expand the third floor basement to extend beneath the slums. I’d gotten permission from Dolstar last night when I sent Kefin and his team over to report. We’d been told to do as we pleased, but I wondered if that was just because he didn’t fully grasp the extent of our plan.

“I’d like to build an entrance in the slum itself, not just in here, but we’ll have to leave that for later when I’ve made contracts with everyone,” I said to the dwarves. “For now, work with Honeur while you get things organized.”

“Got it. I’ll get to diggin’,” Dhoran replied.

“I’ll harden the foundation,” Pola added.

“Honeur, Dhoran’s your man if you have any questions or concerns.”

“Thank you very much. I’m very excited to be working with you all,” the prince said.

Dhoran grunted. Pola nodded. They were dwarves of few words.

I directed my attention to the three elves. "I want you all to communicate with Honeur and write up the kinds of plants we can realistically cultivate and where to grow them. Show it to me when you're done."

They voiced their assent. Before breakfast, I'd called them all to my office and had them swear to me under contract that they were to report any commands they received from the spirits moving forward. I'd had Ketty deliver a similar message the night before, but I felt that I needed to bring it up in person as well. Lycian had been butting heads with Pola in the workshop at the time, though, so my sudden reprimand had come out of nowhere for her, and she'd nearly started crying. Creia had flinched at the mention of Ketty's name while Milphene apologized profusely.

What in the world did Ketty do to them? I wondered. Regardless, my demands were non-negotiable as long as they were slaves under me. I offered again to free them, but as always, they declined. The incident in the forest was water under the bridge on condition they never stood in my or the guild's way, on top of informing me of any spirit-given messages. Should they ever break that promise, their slave crests would be nullified and disappear, and they were to never involve themselves with me again. But I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

After saddling Ketty and Nalia with the duty of periodically verifying that their crests were still present, I shelved the matter. It was entirely possible that the spirits could nullify all these measures and contracts, but I chose to let my anxieties go for the time being. I didn't think the ladies would be willing to try anything after I told them I'd sell them all off if even one of them stepped out of line.

Of course, I didn't take all these measures lightly. Last night, I had convened with Lionel and Ketty and learned a bit more about the spirits and elves. Namely that it was possible for their crests to return after vanishing and that the spirits could involve themselves in altering memories. This troubled me for some time. Ultimately, I had decided that I needed to handle such an important matter myself, but Ketty had said it would be more effective for the elves to think I was more upset than I really was. So she had taken up the cross and played the villain.

After her discussion with them, she'd learned that the spirits' power over others was proportional to the strength of the individual's belief. The spirits couldn't modify slave pacts of those with little faith. Personally, I didn't find this all that helpful, since our current issue involved elves who were decidedly ardent in their devotion. Still, I sincerely needed them for my plan. They were vital to the orchard and our newly born honey production operation, so I really hoped they weren't planning on betraying us anytime soon. If they did, I supposed we could always move forward without them somehow.

I remembered Ketty's face this morning, how fake her smile had looked. How unnerving it was.

"Oh, they were an open book!" she'd said with a catty smile. "Just took some convincing."

It sent a shiver down my spine. Whatever had spawned this side of her, I was certain it had something to do with how hurt Lionel had been yesterday.

In any case, the spirits were a tricky business. As elves aged, their faith grew, as lifetime after lifetime of memories compounded. Milphene herself was well over two hundred, so her love for the spirits wasn't to be underestimated. After all, just as humans derived their magic from Crya the Divine, the elves borrowed theirs from spirits. And, well, I'd only been their master for about ten days. Between me and their deity, it was no contest, really. It didn't take a genius to know who someone like Ketty would prioritize over me or Lionel. Then again, accepting something didn't mean I had to like it.

I found myself longing for those quiet days in Merratoni, when I didn't have to ponder the complications of loyalty and religion.

Anyway, back to giving out orders.

"Nalia, keep up your reading and writing lessons for the younger slaves."

"As you wish."

Lately, she'd been asking me if I wanted to join them for some reason, which I didn't understand. I'd overcome my ignorance long ago...right?

"Kefin, you and your men are on watch around the guild. Yulbo and Verdel, weed out any renegades out there, but stay safe."

“Understood!”

Good reply. They’d really turned over a new leaf.

“Lionel, Ketty, we’re paying the ursans a visit.”

The two promptly flanked me as we ascended to the ground floor, where we met Jord.

“We’re heading out,” I told him. “I trust you with things here, but let me know if you need anything. Any magic items, take it up with Dhoran. And don’t forget to take at least two bodyguards with you if you ever go out.”

“Same as always, I know,” he replied. “Can’t wait till we can go out to eat without a whole escort.”

“I’m doing what I can to get things stable ASAP. Then we can have a bite together.”

“Now I’m excited.”

“All right, we’ll be back later.”

“Sure thing. Leave the guild to us!”

I greeted folks as we passed them on the street, and they replied in kind. Nothing like a bit of friendliness to make a good impression.

Apparently, there were only a handful of robberies and assaults that occurred every year, and the Healer’s Guild alone had probably already met that quota. Kefin had looked a bit guilty when I made the tasteless joke but still warned that we should be cautious of ex-adventurers. I wasn’t so worried with Lionel around, though. If only we could extend that security throughout all of Yenice, but then the wolf-folk and dragonewts would be out of one of their jobs, so maybe not.

Some time later, we made it to the ursans’ territory. Several residents scurried into their homes upon seeing us. I looked at Lionel and Ketty, but neither of them seemed to understand their behavior either. With nothing for it, we made for the speaker of their people—Bryan—but standing in front of his house were a few less-than-savory looking tiger-folk, talking amongst

themselves.

I gave them the same greeting I'd given everyone else.

"Good morning."

Finally taking notice of us, they quickly bowed in reply, then hurried away.

"Who do you think they were?" I asked.

Lionel put his hand to his chin. "No one pleasant. Perhaps Kefin should have his men look into it."

"Yulbo's on guard duty, so we oughta leave it to them," Ketty added, grinning.

"I thought I asked them to suppress the troublemakers with Verdel's team," I said.

"I told 'em to focus on trailing any suspicious characters they spot."

They could do that? Without getting caught? That ninjutsu they'd learned sure sounded handy. But I still couldn't picture someone as lackadaisical as Ketty leading a shadow unit.

"Have any leads?"

"The centaurs, for one. Seems like they're in cahoots with the tiger-folk somehow."

That much already? They probably could've figured that out from Dolstar, but all the same, Ketty had a talent for this sort of work.

"Interesting. But could you please make it a habit to tell me these things ahead of time?"

"Whoopsie!"

I couldn't stay mad at her. "All right, let's find out what those guys were doing here."

I knocked on the door, and it almost instantly flew open. Lionel stopped it inches from my face, but based on the strange squawk that came from the other side, I couldn't say there had been no casualties.

Lionel slowly opened the door, revealing an ursan holding his head and

stumbling back and forth.

“Is this the Bryan you referred to?”

Setting aside my surprise that he could actually tell ursans apart, I cast Heal and Recover on Bryan, then watched him slowly come to his senses. With an awkward apology, he finally invited us in.

“You seem to have your hands full.”

Bryan laughed languidly. “That tends to be the case when your people are a minority.”

I hadn’t noticed at first, but he looked tired. At the end of his rope.

“Would you be willing to trust me with some of your problems?”

He intensely furrowed his brow for a moment. Then a shadow fell over his face.

“I’m aware of your position on the council, Luciel, but this... This is a racial issue. Please understand.”

Did he think it wasn’t blatantly obvious that the ursans and tiger-folk had some sort of a power hierarchy in place? Even if there was no direct coercion going on, one was clearly under the heel of the other. Maybe that was making it hard for him to ask for help, but I couldn’t give it unless he wanted it, and convincing him with words wouldn’t do much good. This was a sticky situation.

I smiled at him. “If you insist. We’ll take our leave, then.”

“You didn’t have business to discuss?”

“I did, but if we can’t trust each other, I’ll have to save the matter of the hon —”

“Sir,” Lionel interrupted.

“Right, sorry. I’ll save things for when you have more confidence in us.”

I smiled again and stood up to leave, when Bryan suddenly sputtered, “H-Hon... Honey?! You can’t mean honey, can you?!”

“Not so loud!” I hissed with my finger in front of my mouth, glancing left and

right. “This is extremely confidential, so be discreet. I’ll talk more once we have a mutual understanding.”

“Please, wait. Can’t you elaborate?” he whispered.

I hummed, pretending to thoroughly and carefully ponder his plight before taking out a small bottle and holding it just out of his grasp.

“I-It’s...”

“Honey,” I stated. “Come by the Healer’s Guild when you feel like trusting me.”

I gave him the bottle, which he timidly accepted. With trembling hands, he undid the lid, slowly dribbled some of the contents into his palm, and licked it. His eyes shot open and he began to shake horribly. After calmly replacing the lid on the bottle, he sprinted outside, started to glow, then exploded into his transformed state with an audible *fwoof* and a grizzly roar.

“Okay, that’s a lot bigger than he was last time,” I said.

“The beastfolk are certainly a diverse people,” Lionel commented.

“Seriously?!” Ketty howled. “That scared the jeepers outta me!”

So much for discretion, I thought. Once Bryan had had his fill, I would evidently need to reiterate that point.

Bryan’s “incident” still hadn’t subsided five minutes later, drawing the attention of some wolf-and tiger-folk guardsmen who came around asking questions. I ended up shaking them off by saying I’d given him some leftover honey, which seemed to convince them. Almost too easily, actually. Just how frequent an occurrence was this? I felt a headache coming on.

It took thirty whole minutes for Bryan to return to his normal form. The ursan was now before me in his miniature state, made even smaller on account of the fact that he was groveling on the ground. I’d confirmed that the sage (the one every Yenitian knew) was the one who had popularized this little display. And now I knew without a doubt that he had not only been reincarnated like me but was also Japanese.

“Listen, get off the ground. You surprised the crap out of me, but I’m not mad.”

“I’m lost for words. I’ve never had such rich, pure honey—honey so magically charged. You could earn the loyalty of the entire ursan people with something like that!”

It was *that* high quality? I knew honey was rare, but I didn’t think it’d win them over that easily. Boy was I glad I’d helped those vespians.

When asked about the tiger-folk from earlier, Bryan opened up like a book. His prior hesitation had vanished.

“As you know, Yenice is currently home to ten beast races, but that wasn’t always the case. It used to be fourteen,” he explained.

“What happened to the other four?”

“The taurians and centaurs left for the east. Rumor has it they’ve made homes in the forests of Blanche. The ivoris people supposedly live in the Shurulian woods. As for the primatians, some say they took to the west, for uncharted territory, but that’s all I know. One thing ties them all together: they didn’t simply leave Yenice. They were driven out.”

“What? The council told me they were greedy and territorial. That they couldn’t stand being tied down by the city or the other races.”

Bryan shook his head. “No one builds a village in the monster-infested wilds for selfish gains. No, they were persecuted, flogged, until they were forced to leave. There were too few of them to fight back.”

“Don’t tell me those tiger-folk were trying to do the same thing to you.”

“No, no. They were ‘reminding’ me to continue supplying the Doctor’s Guild with herbs, not to cooperate with you, and to keep quiet.”

“And if you end up ‘forgetting’?”

“I imagine we’d go the way of the centaurs.”

Whatever way that was, I didn’t want to find out. Seriously, though, what was with the tiger-folk? Shahza wasn’t the only bad egg, it seemed. Sure, there were probably decent people among them, but I’d really appreciate it if they stopped

constantly preying on the weak and outnumbered. They didn't have to take the "beast" in "beastperson" so literally. As things stood now, the dragonewts were looking a whole lot nobler.

"Are your people satisfied with the current state of affairs?"

"We ursans aren't fighters," he admitted woefully. "We *have* to be satisfied. As long as our homes aren't being attacked by monsters."

"What if I told you there might be somewhere else you could live? Somewhere much safer."

"Well, I'd ask where this dreamland was and how to get to it."

"Noted. A messenger will show up tomorrow night. Follow their instructions and come to the Healer's Guild. I'll have to bind you to secrecy with a contract, but you have my word that I have the ursans' best interests in mind."

"You mean that, Luciel? Sir, our people are in your hands!" Bryan lowered his head. They must have really been at their wit's end.

"You'll have to see it all for yourself. Until then."

He escorted us out, then we headed for the Adventurer's Guild. On the way, I made a point to gather other opinions.

"What do you two think?" I asked my companions.

"I believe we can expect the ursans' support with the plan. At the cost of antagonizing the tiger-folk, that is. I expect we'll butt heads. The consolidators of power are always loath to loosen their grip."

I nodded in agreement.

"Heads might hafta start rollin'," Ketty snarled with a nasty grin. Someone was apparently still in a bad mood after yesterday. Enjoying the battlefield didn't mean she took lives lightly.

"Let's not," I said. "Yenice's current power balance is going to get a little unstable, though, that's for sure."

"They'll have to be made to conform one way or another, as with the policies Grandol adopts. It's only a matter of time."

Since when was Lionel an expert on Grandian politics? I really had to uncover that guy's past at some point, but until then, I liked having him as a bodyguard.

"You just do what you gotta do," Ketty mewed. "The two of us'll keep you out of trouble."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. Really."

They looked at each other and smiled awkwardly.

"Sudden gratitude always feels strange."

"You really know how to keep a kitty on her toes."

"Come on," I said. "Let's get a move on."

That slaver had really hit the jackpot with these two. And with the other three, for that matter. I didn't feel like venerating a slaver, though, so I chalked this one up as another point for Monsieur Luck.

05 — The Sage's Legacy

The moment we entered the Adventurer's Guild, all eyes focused on us. A second later, the room was abuzz with whispers. "The Dragonslayer," they muttered. "The Hand of the Dragonewts." "Hell's Inquisitor." "Child of Substance X." "Slave Magnet."

Now, the first one I could understand, but the rest were just getting out of hand. I mean, "Slave Magnet"? Come on. I was a victim of circumstance here. The bullying was uncalled for.

I ignored the quiet heckling and approached the reception desk. I'd earned quite the reputation for myself just two weeks after my bout with the dragon. Maybe healers slaying fire-breathing beasts of legend was a bit less common than I thought.

"Good morning," I greeted the receptionist. "I'd like to speak with one of the guildmasters, if possible."

"O-One moment please."

The cat-woman flew upstairs in a fluster. Soon after, a pale-faced dragonewt descended, pouring sweat.

"You don't need to look so terrified, Goldhus. It's hurtful. Listen, I'm sorry I lost my temper and made you drink that stuff. I felt bad enough to take a mug myself, didn't I?"

The murmurs behind us turned nasty, but Lionel and Ketty silenced them at once with a sharp glare.

A stiff, broken laugh escaped the guildmaster's lips. "M-Me? Terrified? No, sir! Gods, I wonder what's making me sweat so much these days! Anyway, how can I help you?"

Not even the children of dragons were safe from the substance's carnage. I really did feel bad for the guy.

"I'd like to discuss the matter of attracting adventurers, the monsters in the southern forest, and some other things as well. Are you available right now?"

Goldhus dropped the comedy act and returned to his usual self.

“Of course. Let’s continue this in my office.”

He looked strangely unsettled as he led us towards the guildmaster’s quarters. Jeiyas was already inside, doing some bookkeeping by the look of it. He glanced up at his brother with a serious expression, then I was offered a seat.

“Now, what’s this about adventurers and monsters in the forest?” Goldhus asked loudly enough for his sibling to get the picture.

“Yes, well, we visited the forest yesterday, to scout for materials,” I explained. “But the majority of monsters we fought were plain old goblins, orcs, and wolves.”

Jeiyas furrowed his brow and closed his eyes. “I see.”

“We did find trolls and mandrakes but nothing an adventurer could realistically make a living on. I wanted to verify that with you.”

He opened his eyes. “The going rate for mandrakes at the Doctor’s Guild is about ten gold pieces. So it’s no lie that the forest contains lucrative marks, but you’ll find little else than those screeching weeds.”

“But the council told me it was teeming with rare monsters.”

“There was...a rumor in the past. That the forest was home to a spirit.”

Uh, it still is. But how did that translate to money? I didn’t think you could “hunt” a spirit, much less capture one.

“Oh, but we’re well aware that’s no longer the case,” he continued. “Back then, the woods were a popular destination for adventurers looking for its blessing or to capture it for fame and fortune.”

The Spirit of Tides didn’t have it easy. That might have been why it had been so cautious around me.

“That’s why the guild here has so few humans and elves.”

“That’s right. The council has tried to recruit more to act as settlers and tame the forest for them, but they failed spectacularly. Foreign adventurers were

wise to the fact that there would be almost nothing in it for them.”

“Wait, they didn’t want me on the council just to use my status as an S-rank healer to advertise themselves, did they?”

“That seems likely.”

I sank a little. I should have known better than to let myself be taken in by the words of politicians, and politicians of a harsh, unforgiving world like this, no less. At least my eyes had been opened to their two-tongued ways sooner rather than later.

“Is the forest relevant to adventurers at all? Do you ever post missions related to it?”

“No, it’s too dangerous. The deeper you go, the less chance you have of ever coming back. And beasts prowl in the shade, regardless of the time of day. There are records detailing a past attempt to settle the area, but it ended in disaster when a massive stampede of monsters broke out. The Sage of Time is supposedly the one who put a stop to it.”

“He didn’t happen to...make any flashes of light, did he?”

“The records say he summoned the spirits to slay the monsters by the thousands. By himself.”

Summoning magic? This sage was the real deal.

“It sounds like he was incredibly strong.”

“That is what the books tell us. But he’s also credited with causing a mass exodus of adventurers and merchants from the city. After he defended Yenice, the sage shouted at the people and said that those with ‘evil hearts’ could never grasp the spirit that so many were after.”

I didn’t think it had anything to do with purity. The spirit had probably been hiding itself, or there were only certain races that could perceive its form. Whatever it was, I was starting to see the bigger picture.

“Is that related to why there used to be no Healer’s Guild here?”

“Yes. He was aware of the damage he had caused and did what he could to make things right, giving us water by way of the wells, bringing us our unique

spices. But still, he was ultimately what triggered Yenice's recession, and that was how history chose to see him: the arbiter of our problems. We were raised being taught that until emotions eventually boiled over, and the Healer's Guild took the brunt of our frustrations."

It almost hurt to listen to. The sage had saved the town from destruction, realized the weight that gave his words, and tried to use it for good. To save the spirit from greedy men. But in the process, he'd plunged Yenice into an economic crisis. Recognizing his mistake and that no short-term conciliation could right his wrong, he'd established industry and potential commerce for the good of the future. And what did he get for his trouble? Hatred.

"Could that be one of the reasons human supremacism started to take root in Shurule?"

"It's entirely possible. For the sage's part, documents say that many of his wives were beastfolk."

Oh, another ladies' man, huh? He'd been one of *those* people. He must have been generous in more ways than one. Actually, never mind. Thinking about it just made me feel dead inside.

Back to the main topic, this was a bad situation. The council was planning on luring adventurers in with false promises, then using them for their own ends at the expense of the S-rank name. Being the only S-rank healer, I would be made into a scam artist, the Order of Healing my network of liars. And the slander wouldn't end there. Her Holiness would be caught up in it, or even my master and the others in Merratoni.

"Do you have any idea what the council's plan to attract adventurers would've been if they hadn't gotten a Healer's Guild?"

Whatever the solution here was, there had to be a hint somewhere in that answer. The monsters didn't need to be formidable as long as there was profit to be made, a living to be had.

Jeiyas stood up and took out a map. "You've seen this before, right? It's here." He pointed at the blotch of nothing to the west, where the primatians had fled to, according to Bryan. Meaning there was potential for conflict if adventurers started stomping around the area.

“I thought that region was blocked off by mountains and cliffs.”

“Right, but we’ve had word there’s more than just crags and spires there.”

“From who?”

“Bird-folk adventurers.”

That set off alarm bells in my head. I didn’t have the best impression of their representative, or the tiger or rabbit representatives, for that matter.

“Did they mention the kinds of monsters they found?”

“Harpies, lamias, rock-lizards, fay creatures like nymphs and dryads, as well as many species no one’s seen before.”

Those were fantasy monsters, all right. But I had an odd sense of déjà vu. Like I’d heard the same kind of rumor about the presence of mythical creatures meant to entice people. And recently too. Weird.

“I assume none of this has been confirmed. Did the adventurers have any corpses, body parts, magic stones? Anything to prove their claims?”

“No. And no one’s seen or heard anything of them ever since. The guild hasn’t officially acknowledged it.”

This was getting fishier and fishier. But that probably wouldn’t stop everyone. There was always at least one sucker who couldn’t help but wonder “what if” and get pulled in.

“That kind of gossip definitely edges on dangerous.”

“We’ve already had casualties from people trying to climb over the cliffs. That is, until the labyrinth reactivated, which distracted everyone long enough to let them forget everything, but we’re seeing signs that people are talking again.”

Jeiyas frowned, while Goldhus looked like this was the first he’d heard of such a thing. Thank goodness *one* of them had their act together.

“That can’t be good,” I said. “Oh, but for what it’s worth, I’m preparing special adventurer housing for the future.”

“That is reassuring, but how in the world did the council find the budget?”

One thing was sure among all this uncertainty: the council loved its money. At

least, that was how their treasury logs had looked. I understood not wanting to gamble on risky ventures with your country's hard-earned finances, but what else were they going to do with it? Save it? For what? The tight fist they held their purses with didn't bode well for the future build quality of the medical district. I had to be prepared for the worst, but for now, all I could do was wait and see.

"Easy. I'm paying for it myself. That's why I have full control of the entire project. The planned site right now is in the slums. I was going to ask the guild to take care of screening for residents."

"You're *self-funding* it? In the *slums*? Knowing you, you must have some scheme in mind. You want us to find respectable and adequate individuals, I take it."

"That's right. I trust you and Goldhus to sift through the unsavory types or people with racial biases. Also, if and when more adventurers start showing up, I'd like you to let me meet any high-rankers who are considering retiring."

"Retired adventurers? What for?"

"I was thinking about having them take up teaching roles at the school when it opens."

"Well, it's clear you have big plans for Yenice, but be careful. Even positive change that comes too quickly can cause whiplash and by extension, conflict."

Jeiyas wasn't wrong. I had to wonder why he was the *vice* guildmaster and the less responsible of the siblings was the head honcho, but then again, I was a bumbling S-rank healer while Jord was the one who did actual work. An organization really was only as good as its number two.

I gladly accepted his warning and stood up to leave. "Thank you for the advice. I'll do what I can to avoid that."

Jeiyas stood with me. "You always have my personal support, of course."

Goldhus followed. "And mine as well!"

I knew I could trust these two. I just had one more favor to ask of them. "I want to meet the Doctor's Guild guildmaster, if you wouldn't mind mediating."

“Of course.”

With the groundwork laid, we exited the guildhall.

“So,” I said as we left, “what do you guys make of that? You think they played me by asking me to join the council?”

“Almost certainly,” Lionel replied. “Doubtless we’re going to meet even more obstacles as your plan progresses. We’ll need to nip problems in the bud as they arise.”

“Good thing we came to the Adventurer’s Guild, huh?” Ketty remarked.

I sighed. “Will you guys let me free you yet? Can’t you just be normal followers? Heck, I’ll even pay you if you want to be equals.”

But history repeats itself.

“I will stay as I am. I’m at peace with being a mere retainer. Use me as you will.”

“This kitty’s with Sir Lionel. Plus, it’s pretty easy to gather intel as a slave. You’ve got ambition, Chief, so I’m here for it.”

I slumped my shoulders. “Thanks, I guess.”

We walked on while my mind churned with thoughts of things to come.

06 — The Plan

We returned to the Healer's Guild, then went straight downstairs. The first floor of the basement had been turned into a full-on, sprawling pasture.

"I guess the fields and plants have already been moved to the third floor. I'll never get used to seeing this, though."

"Neither will I, it seems."

"Pola and the elf have been at it for a while," Ketty said. "Bet Dhoran's found a productive outlet for their little rivalry."

I agreed with her conjecture. Forêt Noire and the other horses seemed happy enough with the extra room, but it only made me more scared to see what the third floor had become. One way or another, I had to go down there, so I resolved to at least try and have fun with it.

But all my mental preparation still wasn't enough for what awaited us at our destination.

"This is just insane," I said without thinking.

Upon reaching the third floor, the wall at the back of the dwarves' workshops was leagues farther than it had been this morning. In its place were large crop fields easily ten times bigger than anything I'd seen before, with plots to plant trees deliberately sectioned off and that same artificial sun overhead. I had expected fast progress with Dhoran in charge of the expansion, but not, like, half-the-entire-project-all-at-once levels of progress, and the whole area looked, felt, and smelled just like the outdoors, no doubt thanks to Pola and Lycian's intense competition.

"You could make an entire country down here with the right materials."

Lionel and Ketty could only nod in stunned silence. We approached Honeur by the fields before he noticed us himself and flew over.

"Sir Sage, they're incredible! Simply incredible! My people could live great lives here!"

“I’m as surprised as you,” I chuckled. “But it turns out Yenice is more dangerous than I thought, so let’s start bringing people over slowly once you have a base set up.”

“Ah, yes, then please bring me and my attendants along the next time you visit the forest for materials. We’ll gather more of our people from the colony as well as various flowers and trees that will help us to make honey.”

He was raring to go compared to yesterday. Like he’d already settled on pulling the trigger.

“Does that mean what I think it does?”

“You have our full support!”

Yes! I shouted in my head. I hadn’t known the prince had the authority to make that decision by himself, but I wasn’t about to complain. Dhoran’s fine display had earned us the final piece necessary for our underground operation to take off. Not to detract from the fantastic work of Pola and Lycian. I’d say they had earned themselves some extra magic stones.

Milphene, however, looked pale. She’d probably felt pressured after the previous day’s events and pushed herself too hard with her spirit magic. I handed Ketty a potion and asked her to take it over. She passed it along to Milphene with a smile. Hopefully, it would help their relationship to recover a little.

I conveyed to Honeur that we’d be having a meeting the following night with Bryan, the urzan, and Dolstar, head of the slums.

“You’ve been on the move, have you? I see you’re busying yourself above ground as well.”

More like simply watching things fall into place.

“I never expected it to move so quickly. When I thought the plan up, I was hoping to reach this point in maybe half a year. The pace has been almost dizzying.”

“We’ll help however we can.”

“I appreciate it. It would be an enormous reassurance to have the vespians on

our side. It'd let me focus my efforts on things up on the surface while you handle matters down here."

"When do you plan to visit the forest again?"

"We'll need some more materials fairly soon and probably more magic stones than anticipated, so in a few days, I think."

The Adventurer's Guild sold the gems when needed, but that came with too many questions. I wanted to play it safe and have us procure them ourselves.

"May we join you?"

"Of course. Dhoran and Milphene will be with us, so they'll be able to transplant trees without too much damage. Just let us know which ones need moving."

"As sage-like as ever, Sir Sage!"

His eyes sparkled with unwarranted respect. I simply plastered on my best smile and left it at that. It was about midday, so before I got to the rest of my business, I gathered everyone for lunch.

I headed to the mess hall, feeling fulfilled. My once vague ambition had begun to take real shape. With the vespians' help, honey and mead would become viable new exports for Yenice while the ursans and other races had several possibilities open to them, like cotton and clothing production. We could make Yenice a bustling city of merchants, which would bring in more adventurers like the council wanted by virtue of the business folk needing hired bodies. More adventurers, more potential residents, a better future.

My head was swimming with visions of days to come, but I knew that without the help of the Yenitians who already lived here, they would never be more than daydreams. Even so, I couldn't help but be amazed by our progress in less than half a month. It didn't seem so far-fetched anymore that I might not only be able to save every Yenitian from poverty in the near future, but bridge the divides between races, or at least begin to. I just needed someone passionate and respected enough to take my place when the time came for me to leave.

Of course, if things did go as far as I was thinking, the vultures who wanted to pick Yenice clean of money and power would almost assuredly stand in our

way. I had to consider more diplomatic solutions to the inevitable conflict. That being the case, I was still banking on Gulgar or Galba eventually replying to my letters (which they still hadn't done) with their own remedies.

On that note, Yenice was so insanely huge that I wondered if a second city would be off the table, but then I realized I'd been spoiled by Dhoran's abilities and laughed it off...which no one around me blinked twice at, as if me chuckling to myself wasn't even worth the effort acknowledging. But I didn't *always* wear my emotions on my sleeve so blatantly. Er, did I?

When I arrived at the mess hall, Nalia's students—the young boys and girls we'd taken in along with the elves—were preparing our meal in sharp suits and refined maid uniforms.



They were still minors, right on the verge of adulthood, who had decided to remain slaves just as Milphene and the others had. Ever since, Nalia had, at her own request, taken full charge of them in the new orphanage we had added to the guildhall. She was supposed to have been providing them with a basic education, but at some point her lessons had produced three novice butlers and eight maids-in-training. And it was then I had recognized the gap in our understandings of the word “education.”

I thought back to that day...

“Nalia, when you said you were going to teach those kids, was it *just* to turn them into servants?” I asked.

“No, sir,” she replied. “Being a slave is no excuse to embarrass your host, so I saw fit to teach them proper manners and culture.”

“So this whole thing has a purpose?”

“If they’re to carry themselves in such a way as to bring no shame on you, they need to cultivate knowledge, tactfulness, sociability, etiquette, and skills in self-defense.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. They have been very willing pupils and understand the importance of what it is I teach. Although I do worry about their capacity to fully grasp it, given their upbringing. Or lack thereof.”

“And that’s why they’re acting like attendants.”

“Yes, that is why they’re acting like attendants. They’re proactive learners.”

It hit me that Nalia was more of a professional at this sort of thing than I’d given her credit for. I had better things to do than nitpick someone more than qualified for the job.

“Right, sorry for probing.”

“You have every right to, sir.”

“Let me know if you ever need anything for your lessons.”

“I do actually have need of uniforms for the children, if it isn’t too much

trouble.”

“You got it.”

Since then, I had given her free rein. Back to the present...I sat down at the table and asked her how things were going.

“Rather smoothly. They’re as hardworking as they are open-minded, so I expect they’ll be at an acceptable level within the next three months or so.”

The boys and girls beamed like they had never heard a single ounce of positive reinforcement before now. Whatever her standards for “acceptable” were, I was sure they were anything but ambiguous. From what I’d heard, Ketty had been one of Nalia’s students herself, but the only way you’d get her to take another lesson would be, and I quote, “Over my dead body.”

“That’s good to hear.”

The healers and knights had been doing some teaching every now and then in Nalia’s place too. Who knows? Maybe one of the kids would want to join them. Then I could free them and they could work at the guild or manage things underground.

The situation here made for a unique prototype for the school we would eventually build, and it reaffirmed my confidence that our work would make a difference. Seeing the young men and women enjoy learning and getting ahead in life reassured me. There was an element of truth to the idea that you technically didn’t *need* a dedicated place of learning to expand your mind, but that was only true for those with affluence or privilege. People would be more inclined to give school a try now that there was evidence of how effective it was.

After lunch, Dhoran and Honeur returned downstairs to continue their work, and I made for my office, where I pored over the papers of requests from the dwarves.

“Two thousand orc-level magic gems... That’s a lot. We might try having mandrakes in the forest cause a few stampedes so we can nab them all at once.”

"I find that lacking in...practicality," Lionel advised.

"The labyrinth would be best, I know, but we've got so many eyes on us. We need alibis. Hey, what's the matter with you two?"

Lionel and Ketty were smiling widely, eyes bright with excitement.

"Stampedes in the forest, revelry in the labyrinth... This is a joyous occasion!" Lionel exclaimed. "You've finally opened your eyes to the thrill of battle. For my part, I find both equally agreeable."

"Don't forget to bring us along!" Ketty added.

"Not likely. And sorry, but I have never once been thrilled by the prospect of combat. No one get cocky either. Nothing's ever certain in a fight, so don't go treating your lives lightly."

"No harm will come to you."

"You won't lose a hair on that head!"

"I trust you two." Even if their fiery motivation was getting a little too hot for me to handle. "So, what do you think about the beast races who left Yenice? Like the centaurs."

"It's hard to make any firm judgments, seeing as all we know is that they were driven out," Lionel mused.

"Except that they prob'ly don't like Yenice too much."

So not much different from my own interpretation.

"I'm afraid that ignoring the matter will eventually lead to war," I admitted.

"That is certainly a possibility, but jumping at shadows will only create more darkness. I would advise making contact with the outcast races before it becomes an inevitability, if that is possible."

"Right," I agreed. "I'd like to solve this with diplomacy."

"If confrontation does break out, I don't see it ending without a little bloodshed," Ketty said. "It's always harder to incapacitate an opponent than straight out kill them. Depends on how strong they are."

"Monsters are one thing, but I don't want to seriously fight with another

person. I don't think I can kill someone, so I'll need you two to back me up."

I had cut down more monsters than I could count since arriving in this world, butchered and eaten animals, but not once had I taken the life of a person. I knew the difference between killing monsters and people was only semantics, that my wherewithal to do one and not the other was hypocritical, but it just wasn't the same thing to me. I knew that if the time ever came when I had to snuff someone's light out, I would lose something inside myself. Something I'd never be able to get back. The thought terrified me to the point of trembling.

But then Lionel said in a soothing voice, "That is as it should be. If—when—the time comes to dirty your hands, we will do it in your stead."

"You help people, Chief," Ketty said. "You save your hands for life-saving. We'll use ours for taking out bad guys."

Why were they so damn cool? There had to be a reason they were so adamant about remaining slaves, and I wasn't confident I could solve that issue by myself, but I had to repay them someday, somehow. If the time to do the unthinkable did come one day, I had to resolve myself to face it. To be ready for it.

"Thank you."

The two laughed at my lowered head, dispelling the tension in the air. We went on, hammering out our plan, and once we reached a satisfactory stopping point, I decided to loosen up a bit. Lionel joined me in the training grounds on the fourth floor basement for a few good old fashioned bouts.

The Order of Healing — Raising the Bar

Deep beneath the Healer's Guild, on a morning like any other, Luciel faced his opponent: Lionel. The gap in their abilities, however, was less a gap and more a bottomless pit, so Lionel wielded his sword and shield in opposite hands, as a handicap, while the healer bolstered himself with defensive magic (for all the good it did, which was, in fact, very little).

Metal crashed against metal for some time. Luciel wheezed, shoulders heaving with every gasp for air, but the man opposite him had composure to spare. Enough to taunt with a smug grin, even. Neither of the combatants were shocked by this turn of events, though.

Luciel's swings primarily struck only air, but when they did make contact, it was with metal, swiftly parried, then countered with a quick shield bash while his defenses were thoroughly shaken. Meanwhile, Lionel subtly sapped the young man of both his focus and strength with an intense, ferocious aura. Cuts and bruises could be easily mended, but not the mind, not the ever growing frustration of powerlessness.

Even the stalwart Luciel was nearing his limit, his movements slowed, his blade dulled. He simply couldn't find an opening.

And it was in that moment, right at the brink of hopelessness, that Lionel deigned to ask, "Shall we call it here?"

The provocation was thinly veiled, but it was no mere provocation. It was a challenge meant to stir Luciel's spirit, and the healer knew it.

"I'm just getting warmed up. Time to get serious."

"Yes, please do."

"You're about to regret underestimating me!"

Luciel cried out and mustered his strength, more than he had faced the red dragon with, and brought down the magically charged Illusion Sword with all his might and then some. It was enough raw power to rend his target's shield in two. And yet...

“Did the Whirlwind not teach you to never open with your best?”

The aforementioned shield flew at Luciel too quickly for him to react, and the two collided. When he regained his senses, a sword was at his neck, Lionel grinning above the hilt.

“Well, I didn’t think you’d throw the dang thing at me.”

Lionel chuckled. “Always expect the unexpected. Anything is possible in the heat of battle. Although, I suppose that takes an element of experience.”

“I’d like to think I have a bit of that, considering how much I trained with my master and all the monsters I’ve fought.”

“True, you know how to stand fast in the face of danger, but your technique, your stance, it’s all wrong. You have strange habits and quirks that I would never expect from the Whirlwind’s personal apprentice.”

Luciel sank. He had been told the same thing by Brod before leaving for Yenice. But that sloppy, self-immolating way of fighting that relied so heavily on his healing had been born out of necessity during his time in the Church’s labyrinth. In particular, against the so-called lich knight, which was so overwhelmingly fearsome that this technique had been the only way Luciel could have hoped to snatch victory from the jaws of death. It was from encounters like those that the healer’s fighting style had become so distorted, so hyper-focused on avoiding death, regardless of the short-term injuries he might incur along the way.

The unfortunate reality, though, was that such a tactic was only effective against mindless husks or opponents of a similar skill level. To people like Brod or Lionel, he was just a fool throwing himself into danger without a care for self-preservation. But Lionel was unaware of all of this, confused as to why the Whirlwind would teach him to fight in such a way.

“There are some opponents, such as the dragon you confronted, who your current strategy may be your only option against, but eventually you’ll slip and it will mean the end for you. You can’t carelessly take blows simply because you can use healing magic.”

“Sure, but all of the blows I took this time were counters. You kept deflecting

and hitting me when my guard was down, so I don't see how I was supposed to do anything about it."

"Hm. Well, you know the number of opponents, for one thing. You had that vital knowledge and, considering you're a healer, you should have retreated the moment you saw danger."

"Retreat? From training?"

"Correct. Eventually, you'll need to develop an instinct for which attacks to dodge, which to parry, and so forth."

"I guess I see what you're trying to say."

"To the point: there is no better teacher than experience."

"Got it. We ready for another round?"

"No. This is where your battle with me ends."

"With you?"

"I want to see you against the knights and the other slaves. Without healing. Your subordinates will take that role."

Luciel felt his face turn to stone. Without being able to precisely time spells based on the situation, the risk of injury would be very real, and if he declined Lionel's terms, he would seem untrusting towards his fellow healers.

But these worries were, in fact, secondary to another. The healer's true concern was whether or not he could bring himself to swing his blade without restraint. He had no experience in holding back before, because he'd never had to. Lionel and Brod were too strong to necessitate it, and he trusted them. But what if his adversary weren't so monstrous in strength? Luciel was afraid of what he might do, and Lionel could see it in his expression.

"It's time to dispel your misconceptions," he said. "You will fight."

"Misconceptions?"

"Ever since you became a 'dragonslayer,' you seem to have come under the impression that you've somehow become strong."

"You think so?"

His bouts with Lionel had kept Luciel relatively humble, but he certainly didn't consider himself entirely incapable. So began the impromptu tournament. Its rules were simple: no healing—so as to allow a proper assessment of skill—and no use of the Illusion Sword—so as to prevent cutting every one of Dhoran's blades in two.

The results were a resounding defeat on Luciel's part. His misconceptions had been utterly dispelled. Perhaps too violently, though. In an attempt to recover his spirits, another tournament was held, this time allowing the use of magic. Under these conditions, Luciel emerged victorious in over half of the bouts. At least somewhat satisfied with this outcome, the young healer readied himself for Lionel's new training regimen.

As for the rest, Luciel had inspired them. Many others found renewed motivation to throw themselves headlong into their training, while the healers improved in their magic through Luciel's new confidence in allowing them to heal the fighters' injuries.

07 — The Council

It was the next day, and the sun neared the horizon. In the guildmaster's office of the Healer's Guild, a meeting was about to take place. A secret gathering for the betterment of Yenice. All were in attendance: the slum's kingpin, Dolstar, with three subordinates. Bryan of the ursans, along with two attendants. Honeur, the prince of the vespians, and his retainers. And me, as well as my bodyguard, Lionel.

"Thank you all for coming," I began. "I asked you all to be here because there's been a small change of plans."

"Something to do with the vespian over there, I assume?" Dolstar asked.

"Right. But this is ultimately a small change that should have no real effect on the rest of you. Why don't we all introduce ourselves before I get to brass tacks?"

I smiled as the others glanced around at each other. Dolstar raised his hand first.

"I'm Dolstar. I run things in the slums. My boys attacked Sir Healer there and got enslaved, but he gave us half-beasts a second chance. That's why I'm here and why I'm staking my life on this plan."

When his expository monologue finally finished, an awkward silence blanketed the room for a while. The way he gripped the conversation spoke to how he led his people in the slums.

Honeur came next. "I am the prince of the vespians, Honeur. Sir Sage rescued my people from the brink of destruction, and when he told us his plan, we were moved to participate."

Bryan ceased gazing at the prince to take his turn. "Bryan the ursan, at your service. My people are a minority, and we've suffered for it, but Mister Luciel offered his hand—or rather, his honey—and so we've decided to come under his employ!"

My "employ"? What was this, a business merger? I'd never heard of any

buyout done with a bottle of honey, but there we were.

Honeur applauded Bryan's introduction, seemingly elated to have found a compatriot in the world of honey-lovers. And thank goodness too. I had secretly been a little worried about what he would think about using his craft as a means to sway someone. Now I could breathe a sigh of relief.

"There are three topics I'd like to center this meeting around," I began. "First, evacuation of the slums. Second, construction of the school and adventurer housing. And lastly, new industries."

Bryan didn't seem to be following all that well, but the rest quietly nodded.

"Let's start with the evacuation schedule," I continued. "Dolstar, have any of the representatives contacted you concerning the medical district's construction?"

"Not a word," he replied. "Bet they're planning on letting it sit, then blaming us for being behind schedule."

Fine, if that was how they were going to be, I'd just lay on the pressure by actually doing my own job. I also needed to make sure to have Dhoran inspect the work when it began, to make sure they weren't skimping on build quality.

"I'll see what the deal is at our next meeting. Back to the slums, I expect clearing everything out to take about half a day at most, but it's apparently going to need quite a few magic stones, so that likely won't happen for another month."

"The residents already know the deal. I've told them we'll all be moving. How do we play it if this medical district thing starts happening? Prioritize that?"

Dhoran had already told me we'd have no shortage of workers, and I had already sent letters outlining all this to Merratoni, so I was feeling confident.

"Not to worry. I think you'll understand once I explain the second topic I wanted to talk about." I took a dramatic pause and looked around the room. "We're building the school and houses with interchangeable parts."

"Inter-whatable parts?" Bryan questioned, puzzled. "And wait, a school? In Yenice?"

So much for my dramatic pause. It was utterly wasted, all because I'd neglected to consider the fact that no one knew what the concept of interchangeable parts was. I took some time to explain the basic concepts, how it allowed mass production by making use of the same fundamental pieces, put together in the same ways. Translated to houses, this meant that the exact same cookie-cutter style could be replicated at minimal cost, with minimal labor at a minimal skill level. None of this was actually necessary with Dhoran around, but he wouldn't always be. I was trying to consider the future once we were gone.

"I understand this 'interchangeable parts' idea now, but the school..."

Bryan sure was out of the loop for the head of an entire race of people. Or was that supposed to be another one of my jobs? It better not be.

"The proposal passed at the last council meeting," I clarified.

"Am I right in assuming you're in charge of the project? If so, where are the funds coming from?"

"Me."

"What?!" The ursan recoiled. "And they approved that?!"

The rest of the attendees shared his expression of shock. Had I really forgotten to fill Dolstar in? A few of my wires must've gotten crossed after explaining everything to the dragonewt brothers.

Truth be told, though, it was going to cost almost nothing. We were procuring our own materials, and no one would let me pay them an actual wage (although I was saving that money as "severance pay" for when I finally freed the slaves). But even setting that aside, there was so little to spend money on in this world that I'd saved up more than I knew what to do with. Not that I intended to blow it all at once. You never knew when someone talented might show up who needed hiring, like Lionel.

But they didn't need to know all that.

"I'm acting with the council's full understanding and consent. They probably think I'm some naive kid volunteering for charity work, but I consider this an investment."

The room was quiet. I was aware of how ridiculous it sounded for a single young man to fund a venture this ambitious, but it was vital that I had full directive control in the slums for the plan to work. When all was said and done, it would pay off.

“Now, not that I’m opposed to it, but where are you going to find kids to *attend* a school?” Bryan asked.

So, honey wasn’t the *only* thing on his mind.

“True, that may be a difficult hurdle to overcome right now, but that’s where our meeting’s third topic comes into play. Follow me. I think you should see for yourselves.”

Everyone acquiesced, although somewhat dubiously. But their suspicion didn’t last long. Dolstar, Bryan, and their companions went wide-eyed when they saw the basement. I proceeded to guide them around and explain the operation. When I finished, the entire group, without missing a beat, cried in unison, “Are you God?!”

It reminded me of the first time I’d met Pola and made me smile. But I denied the claim, of course.

“I look forward to a prosperous relationship with you all,” I said.

Suddenly, *fwoof*. The ursans explosively transformed with mighty roars. After their voices died down, Bryan bowed to the ground, his attendants following suit.

“For you and for honey, Mister Luciel, we ursans swear our loyalty!” he declared.

Those who had never seen an ursan’s enlarged form seemed taken aback for a moment, but the sheer surrealism of the sight of massive bears groveling at someone’s feet proved too much to withstand. Laughter soon won out. I was no exception. I found the realization that ursans didn’t need honey to have these sorts of accidents extremely amusing. Speaking of new ideas, I passed a few along to Bryan for the role his people would play.

And with that, we disbanded, to reconvene regularly from that point on. I sent Dolstar with Kefin’s group and Bryan with Yulbo’s, just to be safe, then

returned to my office with Lionel and Ketty.

“Thoughts?” I asked.

“I believe we can rely on their cooperation, but the remaining seven beast races, excluding the dragonewts, could be threats if we aren’t careful.”

The other race not currently represented on the council—the tanukins—seemed to have slipped Lionel’s memory, but whatever.

“You can let me worry about that,” Ketty said. “Say, mind if I borrow Kefin and his boys? Just when we’re not out in the forest, y’know.”

“By ‘his boys’ do you mean the entirety of his men? All three units?”

“Is that a no?”

We did have the knights in the Order to handle guarding the guild, and Ketty had pretty much taken total control of Kefin’s teams at this point, so I didn’t see any issue with that.

“No, I’ll allow it. As long as you keep me informed, don’t act without permission, and promise not to do anything reckless.”

“Can do!”

Our first secret meeting came to an uneventful conclusion. The same probably couldn’t be said about the gathering of representatives scheduled two days from now.

*

Situated in the north central region of the city of Yenice was an estate—the site of the Yenitian council of representatives. Presiding over the day’s meeting was Forence, speaker for the fox-people. According to Ketty’s reports, he had a way with money, but not in a miserly way. It would be more apt to describe him as methodical. There was nothing particularly outstanding about the fox-people compared to other races, aside from a few loans that the dragonewts and tiger-folk owed them.

“Council is now in session,” he announced. “I’ll begin with a summary of the Commerce Guild’s commissioned sales, as well as for those of the local businesses.”

Forence elaborated on the net profit from the state's marketplace and the guild's expenditures. It was a far more elaborate and complete report than the one given last month. Nothing stood out to me, but considering only the fox-folk ever had a hand in the finances, it might have been a good idea to confirm the Commerce Guild's accounts personally at some point.

"That is all. If there are any questions or concerns, please raise your hand. If not...then let's proceed. Representative Orga, if you'll please give your report on the crop yields."

Orga: representative of the wolf-folk, friend of Gulgar and Galba, and father to a potential candidate for Yenice's first graduating class. I hadn't forgotten the lengths he'd gone to for Yenice's Healer's Guild, so I didn't count him among our enemies. Ketty confirmed his trustworthy nature as well. The tiger-folk and rabbit-folk treated his people poorly, though.

"Right, the spice harvest is coming along..."

After his account of the month's harvest and next month's expected yield, Representative Liliard followed with his own, detailing planned field expansions and recent pillaging by monsters. From what Ketty had uncovered, he was an opportunistic man. He could change sides at the drop of a hat and often cozied up to whoever was strongest. A regular sycophant. Rabbit-folk like him were known for seeming docile at first, only to pull surprisingly nasty stunts when you least expected it. They were especially harsh towards wolf-, dog-, and bird-folk.

Speaking of dog-folk, Representative Sebeck took the floor and offered his report of newly reclaimed land for farming. He was supposedly subservient to anyone stronger than him, but he wasn't weak himself. He'd earned his position by being the toughest of his people. Dog-folk seemed unremarkable at first glance, but they took loyalty seriously and would follow you to the end of the world. So they made good allies, except it worked in reverse too. Once they didn't like you, it was hard to change their minds.

Representative Cathrel continued the meeting with a review of the wheat fields and the latest on the hunting of monsters. The cat-man loved his downtime and people often saw him slinking around other races' territories.

Capriciousness was apparently a common trait among their kind, to the point that most others didn't trust their word. I had never gotten that impression from Ketty, but from what I'd heard, that was because she felt indebted to me and Lionel.

"Normally, we would expect the defense report from Representative Jhak, but from today on, it will be given by his fellow dragonewt, Seud."

I liked to think I had a firm grasp of the dragonewts, thanks to the Adventurer's Guild brothers.

"Of course. An ursan suddenly transformed four days ago, but there's nothing else worth noting."

Nothing worth noting, eh? Ketty's report had made it clear to me that there were cases of guards causing trouble with other races. Noticing the look on my face, Representative Cathrel started to sweat.

"That incident was my fault," I said. "I gave an ursan acquaintance of mine some honey I happened to have on me."

Forence sharpened his gaze. "Honey, you say?"

"That's right. I received some during my time in Shurule, and sometimes I use it for cooking. You remember Bryan, don't you, Representative Forence? He asked me to import some for him, but you know how expensive that stuff can get, so I offered what I had on me. I can't say I expected him to lose it like that, though."

"That is what happens when you give them honey," Representative Thouzer replied condescendingly.

"Care to give your report of the skies, Representative?" Forence asked.

"Nothing of note," the bird-man answered.

Bird-folk were extremely proud and often looked down on (both literally and figuratively) the other races for their lack of flying ability. Consequently, they frequently slacked off on work they considered themselves above doing. Their heads were so inflated that they habitually let themselves be misled by rumors and misinformation. But the other races put up with them because they could

keep watch from above.

“Then any representative—oh, my apologies, and you, of course, Luciel,” Forence corrected himself. “Please raise your hand if anyone has anything else they’d like to discuss or propose.”

No one did. As was par for the course, I imagined. They weren’t going to breeze through this meeting without mentioning a single thing from the last one, were they? There were projects and plans I needed to hear about. What had even been the point of this? To hear the latest news?

It looked like I was going to have to make use of my intel. I raised my hand. There was a subtle but nonetheless meaningful pause that didn’t escape my notice.

“Yes, Luciel?”

My objective was simple: get them to do their jobs as leaders of the people, even if it cost me their regard.

“I don’t have a proposal, per se, but there are some things I’d like to discuss. Specifically, things that have yet to be touched upon. It’s only a few questions; I promise.”

My professional smile only seemed to put them on guard even more. But that wasn’t about to stop me.

“So, first of all,” I continued, “who is leading the progress on the medical district? We need to know the scale of it, so we can determine how many people will need to be relocated, the resources that’s going to require, *et cetera* et cetera.”

The silence was deafening. Me? Follow up on the medical district? It was simply unfathomable. As far as they knew, I’d been spending all my time in the forest or the Adventurer’s Guild for the last half-month.

It was safe to assume that the fact that no one had spoken up meant absolutely no progress was being made. Unfortunately for them, I intended to follow through on my promises.

I continued to smile. “Did we not decide that someone would be chosen to

lead the project at our last meeting? Maybe I'm misremembering. I don't mind assigning people if we don't have anyone yet."

"We are...in the process of allocating a budget," Forence said in an oddly subdued tone.

"Oh, so you're the one in charge of that?"

"With the dragonewts, that is."

"Interesting. Seud, could you please tell me how things are going? With the Draconis as your witness, if you don't mind."

The dragonewt hesitated, stunned. "This is the first I've heard of our involvement."

Whatever clever excuse he might have normally come up with, he couldn't bring himself to lie to one chosen by the dragons.

"Representative Forence, care to explain what the meaning of this is?"

"Luciel, I'm sure he's simply not remembering correctly," Orga conveniently interjected in the fox-man's defense. I could make him look good while having someone in place to hold Forence accountable.

"Fair enough. These things happen. But could you have a rough idea ready by next meeting? An estimated build time for a hall big enough for both the Healer's and Doctor's Guilds, and a budget for labor and resources would be nice."

Now he *had* to do something. No more sitting on his backside.

"I'll get it done."

"Orga, can you help him if he's short on people?"

"I can certainly try," the wolf-man replied.

"Thanks. Now, the next thing I wanted to talk about: I looked into Yenice's citizens a little and counted a little under eight thousand, excluding adventurers. About two thousand of those are children."

"Is something strange about that?"

I would've thought that would be enough to set off any red flags for anyone

who was familiar with the treasury. Someone was taking a piece of the pie for themselves. Maybe even a representative.

“Pardon me if I’m mistaken in any of these, but based on those numbers, the funds being used for state laborers in the fields should be less than what I saw in the ledger. At least over twenty percent less, to be exact. I just wanted to verify that it was correct.”

When I’d heard the numbers from Ketty and her team, something didn’t quite seem to fit with what I had read in the ledger. She and Kefin’s men had looked into the matter with the help of Dolstar and his lot. The one saving grace was that it turned out there was no wage discrimination (equal *contribution* was a different matter, though).

“That’s impossible!” Forence exclaimed. “I need to see it for myself.”

The representative flung his duty as the meeting’s conductor to the wind and dashed to retrieve the ledger. I considered the possibility of fake accounts and such, but his baffled reaction had seemed genuine, so I decided to let him handle it and moved on to another pressing issue.

“I hope I haven’t offended him. I didn’t mean to, at least. Representative Thouzer, I had something to ask you in the meantime.”

“Yes?”

“I heard rumors that a few brave adventurers—bird-folk like yourself—actually crossed the western mountains and saw the uncharted territory with their own eyes. Do you know anything about that?”

“I have gotten wind of the same rumors, but I’ve not heard who they refer to.”

“Right, adventurers can be slippery like that. If it’s not too much trouble, would you mind looking into it before our next meeting?”

“For what purpose?”

“Well, I think they’re deserving of a hero’s welcome. I want them to travel west again and bring back traces, or even remains, of rare monsters. It would make Yenice that much more attractive to other adventurers.”

“All right, then. But as you say, they’re not a bunch who are easily pinned down. My search may come up empty.”

“We should consider giving up on this adventurer business if that’s the case. The Adventurer’s Guild told me that the forest really isn’t home to anything worth hunting. If we try to advertise it as such, we’ll be painted as frauds.”

On the off chance we did find those intrepid adventurers, I could safely leave attracting more to the bird-folk while I handled the housing project. Then again, the representatives looked awfully uncomfortable, so maybe they really had been trying to pull one over me. Well, sorry, but I was a well-adjusted member of society who confirmed facts for myself.

My smile didn’t wane as I turned to the tiger-folk representative, Shahza’s replacement. He sort of rubbed me wrong, but I couldn’t tell if that was because of my history with his predecessor or because of the nasty look in his eyes that he wasn’t hiding as well as he likely thought.

“Representative Seud reported that an ursan, Bryan, suddenly transformed a few days ago. Well, just before that, I saw several tiger-folk in front of his home, intimidating him. Representative, I ask that you keep your people in line.”

Thouzer exploded before anyone else. “What?! Is this what you call ‘good behavior’?! You’re already on thin ice after what Shahza pulled, and now you’re threatening Bryan?!”

I had forgotten that those two were good friends.

The tiger-man flinched at Thouzer’s shouting. “Th-This is the first I’ve heard of any of this!” he stuttered. “Please, give me some time to look into it!”

I couldn’t tell if his panic came from genuine ignorance or concern about how much Bryan had said. One thing was clear, though. The animosity that had been solely focused on me moments before now permeated the entire room. My suspicion that being a representative didn’t necessarily mean they held the most sway among their people was looking more and more credible. Either that, or every council member had extreme tunnel vision regarding their own race.

“By the way, state laborers get their wages from the treasury, correct? How is

that money distributed, physically?” I asked.

“It...” Orga grimaced. “It depends on the representative at the time.”

That didn’t sound good. I elected to change the subject.

“I want to go over the school and adventurer housing now. We can expect the entire slum district to be evacuated in about three months.” The council oohed in amazement. “The remaining land will be used for the school and new homes, which we can expect to take another three months. Everything should be complete within half a year.”

“That’s incredible,” Liliard said. “I’m impressed you managed to be rid of the halflings so easily.”

I thought I had said *evacuation*. I wasn’t “rid of” the twinbloods. Far from it.

“I’m not getting rid of them. Just moving them somewhere a little better,” I explained.

“Incredible!”

“And so quickly!”

Sebeck and Cathrel beamed. Even Thouzer and Shahza’s replacement took a moment to stop snarling at each other to be amazed. Orga and Jhak, however, looked concerned. Almost sad, even. That display of emotion made them good candidates for partners. My blessing made me confident the dragonewt would be able to keep a secret, but Orga was a principled and by-the-books kind of man. There was no telling how he’d react if he heard my entire plan. It couldn’t hurt to close the distance between us a little, though.

I had arrived at the climax. It was all or nothing from here. I had been given leave to handle the slums as I saw fit for the time being, but I needed to ensure complete autonomy going forward.

“Now, all told, vacating the slums, finishing the schoolhouse, and setting up the fifty adventurer houses—including resource and labor costs calculated at market value—comes to a total of approximately thirty platinum pieces.”

“You can’t be asking us to withdraw those kinds of funds from the national vault, can you? It would send us into a financial crisis!”

“That’s impossible and you know it, Luciel.”

“You said there would be no material costs at the last meeting!”

“No, I only said I would visit the forest to *scout for* materials,” I corrected.

“You all said there was no budget for attracting the adventurers you wanted, but you can’t honestly expect someone to do all that for you for free.”

“I’m almost certain you said there would be no costs other than labor,” Liliard insisted. Unfortunately, he was “almost certain” because he was wrong.

“I said no such thing,” I laughed. “You’re the one who made those claims, Representative. The only thing I received the official go-ahead for was handling matters in the slums. Honestly, have you all forgotten why I took this position in the first place? I’m certainly not being paid for it.”

I found it hard to believe that they *really* thought I was running a charity here. Anyway, things were proceeding, and now I just had to find the right compromise.

But then Forence burst back into the room, pale in the face.

“I need to interrupt, Luciel,” he sputtered.

“Was there a discrepancy in the labor fees?”

“You were exactly right. I checked the accounts and checked them again, but the calculations don’t match up.”

“Meaning?”

“There’s foul play afoot. I’m sorry, but I don’t think we’ll be able to provide any funds any time soon with things as they are.”

“Progress is already well underway, and I’ve spent at least five platinum as is. Surely you can reimburse me that much.”

“I-I’m afraid that might be difficult.”

“So you’re saying I need to personally fund infrastructure for *your* country?”

“It’s just, the treasury itself needs investigating and, well...”

I looked around the room. Every representative avoided my eyes. Wow. Negotiations were already going well, and now this? It was like a golden

opportunity had just fallen right into my lap. Monsieur Luck had been killing it lately.

“I see how it is. You made me Yenice’s representative to make a fool of me. Is that it?”

“N-No, of course not!”

It wasn’t fair of me to single out Forence when the ones to blame were those embezzling national funds, and I was never good at playing bad cop, so I figured I ought to end things quickly. I didn’t want to start any unnecessary grudges.

“Then let’s make a deal. First, I want you to let me buy the territory encompassing the entirety of the slums.”

No one seemed to have any objections. Really, they looked more confused than anything.

“Next, we proceed with construction of the housing and school, but they’re to be under my and the Healer’s Guild’s joint ownership.”

“Will attendance be affected?” Orga asked, likely worried about Sheila’s education.

“Children will still be allowed to attend free of charge. Forence, does the state itself deal with purchasing the Doctor’s Guild medicine or does the Commerce Guild?”

“The Commerce Guild handles dealings there,” the fox-man replied.

“In that case, I want the Healer’s Guild to be able to make sales without any taxes or fees as well. Those are my three conditions.”

“Purchasing rights for the slum district, ownership of the school and new housing, and permission to make sales duty-free...” he echoed. “We can allow the first on a personal basis, but not to the Republic of Saint Shurule itself. I have a counteroffer for the second. We can accept the third.”

I had figured as much. “Your counteroffer?”

“Yenice maintains the right to purchase the properties back if we ever desire.”

“Fair enough. But the price will be calculated according to their estimated

value at the time, including if the Healer's Guild is ever forced out of the city."

Forence looked at the other representatives, who nodded in agreement.

"Perfect," I said. "Now, to make sure that no one can make any claims about who said what, I'm going to have everyone here sign a contract, stating that you agree to everything we've said."

I took out some parchment and began listing the terms and conditions. Every council member signed their name, and when they finished, I imbued the contract with magic and a prayer to Crya the Divine. If any of the signers' people broke its provisions, they would lose their right to hold office. This made some of the representatives hesitate, but ultimately I received everyone's signature.

I made three copies: one for myself, one for the council, and another for safekeeping that I would leave with the Adventurer's Guild. They wouldn't complain, considering it involved plans to bring more adventurers to the city.

"That settles it. Don't forget to let your people know, and I won't either. Now let's get that medical district made so adventurers can have some peace of mind. I'm sure the Adventurer's Guild will help if we ask."

"The dragonewts, tiger-folk, and bird-folk will see to carving out land for the district," Forence directed. "I'll work out the details of relocating residents. The bird-folk should stay in contact with the Adventurer's Guild about the recent monster pillagings. The rest of you, keep the fields running."

He didn't have an ounce of authority to be making such demands, but Forence was seeing red now that it was clear someone had been stealing money. No one had the courage to call him out.

And so the council meeting came to a not-so-uneventful conclusion.

On the way back to the Healer's Guild with Lionel and Ketty, I thought back on the events of the meeting. I'd actually just bought up the entire slums. I mean, I had been the one to propose it, but it was still hard to believe. All I had really needed was free rein, the leeway to act on our own in order to hide the construction going on underground. Maybe I'd overdone it a little.

Ever since the water spirit incident, I was being more cautious than ever, and

now I'd gone and bound entire races of people to a legal contract. A physical one this time. I'd been relying far too much on the verbal, magical variety. Forence and the ledger discrepancy had taught me the importance of having things in proper writing.

Lionel noticed me lost in thought and smiled. "I'd say you've assured us some peace of mind for the time being."

"I hope so," I replied. "Still, we should put up the barrier around the guild when we go back to the forest."

"That may be wise. People and their actions are unpredictable. You never know when violence might break out."

"You know, Chief, you really laid on the pressure back there," Ketty said. "I was a little afraid of how things were gonna turn out."

"Er, sorry about that." I'd been away from the business table for a few years now, and my negotiating skills could use some work.

"You oughta learn how to barter a bit more subtly, or you won't get so lucky in the future."

"Now, Ketty, he's only twenty. You can't blame the boy for his lack of experience."

Lionel's comfort was in vain. I might have been five years out of practice, but I'd spent the better part of my life making business deals, so it hurt to be treated like an amateur. In my defense, the political sphere was hardly my specialty. But I still felt frustrated by how ineffective I was.

"I'll work on it," I promised. "It's a good thing you got that info on Forence, though, Ketty. Things might not have worked out as well if he hadn't stayed impartial at the meeting."

"Aww, all I did was give the scoop. You're the one who put it to use," she insisted.

Yesterday, word had reached me that Forence's wife was blind. Or *had been*, to be exact. I had immediately gone over and healed her, securing the representative's neutrality in the council. It was no exaggeration to say that

everything had turned out okay in the end thanks to Ketty and Kefin's investigative efforts.

I had to learn to utilize information more elegantly, though. I wondered if anyone would be up for a few roleplay sessions to help get me back in shape...

08 — Master of the Doctor's Guild

When we returned to the Healer's Guild, a message from Goldhus was waiting for us with one of Nalia's maids-in-training.

"Your presence at the Doctor's Guild is humbly requested by noon tomorrow, sir."

I didn't know how much of her etiquette was attributed to Nalia's teaching and how much to the girl's natural comeliness, but she got a passing grade from me. You couldn't ask for anything more from a guild receptionist.

"Thanks. Keep up the good work with Nalia," I said back.

She bowed and replied with a warm smile. I proceeded to the basement, where I found Dhoran on the third floor, arms crossed, gazing proudly out at his work.

"All finished expanding?" I asked.

"Still a ways to go, but it's goin'."

"You've been doing good work. Sorry there's so much of it."

Honestly, it was impressive that he and Pola had done so much on their own. Downright awe-inspiring.

"Don't make me gag, lad. You had an idea, I made it reality. Nothin' to it."

Nothing shook that dwarf.

"If you say so. How's progress on the school and houses?"

"Houses're simple enough, since they're from the same parts 'n all. Just gotta make one to copy. Still need lumber and stones like I asked in the report."

"Guess we'll have to delay that project a bit."

Dhoran shook his head and sighed. "Damn shame. Been lookin' forward to that one the most."

"Luc... Mister Luciel." Pola came up. "I'm done analyzing."

"*You're* done? I will thank you not to make it sound like you did everything,"

Lycian fumed. “Mister Luciel, the items you procured in the labyrinth have been thoroughly appraised. Largely by yours truly, of course.”



Pola didn't miss a beat. "Here's the bangle first."

She handed me the bracelet we'd found on the forty-seventh floor of the labyrinth.

"Imbuing it with magic and speaking the magic words will create a barrier of wind around the wearer," Lycian expounded proudly. "It renders one invulnerable to fire and ice magic as well as breath attacks."

A barrier? Not the same as Area Barrier, I assumed.

"Then if I'd worn this against the red dragon..."

"It probably would've nullified its fire breath," Pola answered, averting her eyes.

Well, it was neat that wind was enough to do that, but I doubted it could have done much about the tail. So whatever.

"Red dragon? Mister Luciel, what—"

"This is a hermit key," Pola interrupted. "From the fiftieth floor. It's a good find." She handed it to me.

"How do I use it?" I asked. "Better question: what does it do?"

"It creates an extradimensional space," she explained. "You go in by focusing magic into it, envisioning a door, then turning the key. You can build things inside too."

I'd been expecting something more along the lines of being able to open any lock, but that was just as OP in its own right.

"You're saying we've got a safe haven wherever we go?"

Pola went quiet.

"That particular hermit key is one of the lower varieties," Lycian answered instead. "It's meant for familiars. Humans can't enter."

These two made a strangely good team. But that aside, man, it was a bummer that people couldn't make use of something so convenient. Unless Forêt Noire and the other horses could?

“What about horses? Would they be all right?”

“Yes, but keep in mind it could also be sold for a high price. Many auctions have such items on the market for a small fortune,” the elf tried to persuade me. She probably wanted the funds for more magic stones.

I’d actually learned a bit about what had landed Lycian in slavery, and it was easy to say it was out of pure single-mindedness—an irresponsible lack of regard for funds, which she primarily used to satisfy her curiosity until they ran dry. And make no mistake, that was part of it, but the real problem was that she was stubborn. An acquaintance who sympathized with her had commissioned an item, even providing the materials, but she wound up indulging her imagination once again. And when she couldn’t compensate her client for the loss, that was it.

I was sure she could have made plenty of sellable tools if she’d wanted to, but she simply had no interest in profit. She was in it for the process, the creation. Her concern for money now proved that she’d learned her lesson, though. At least, that was how I chose to interpret it.

“I don’t think I’ll be selling this. It could be useful,” I said. “Don’t expect to sell anything you guys make for the time being.”

Lycian didn’t reply.

“I couldn’t decipher the book, though,” Pola said, handing me the old volume. Apparently, we’d need a decoder or some such device to read the ancient script. Pola had been particularly interested in taking on the task, but after meeting Lycian, her attention had been more on artificing than anything else. So into the magic bag it went, its mysteries unsolved for the moment.

I told the two of them about a magic item I wanted made for providing water to the fields, asked them to let me know about any potential ideas, and told them we would be going to the forest the morning after next.

“So no all-nighters, got it? I need you guys awake.”

After relaying the same information to Honeur, I spent the rest of the day doing my usual training.

The next day, Lionel and Ketty accompanied Goldhus and me to the Doctor's Guild.

"I probably should have asked this earlier, but how did they react?" I asked.

"The guild agreed to meet you as soon as I told them who you were, sir," Goldhus replied. "Not without a bit of uncertainty, given what happened with Grohala, of course, but the guildmaster has been wanting to see you."

"How long are you going to call me 'sir'? You can relax. I'm not going to make you drink any more Substance X."

"Oh, no, it's your aura that makes me show respect. You understand."

"My blessing, right. But I would like you to dial it back in public, if possible."

"I'll see what I can do."

Goldhus guided me into the guildhall but not to any office. Instead, he led me down to an underground workshop. For a moment, I braced myself for a sight similar to the Healer's Guild, but the pungent fragrance stinging my nostrils assuaged my concerns. I passed a few nose plugs to Lionel and Ketty, then proceeded. Goldhus wasn't immune to the smell either, but he laughed it off when I asked about it. It seemed to be nothing compared to Substance X.

"Ah, you're here."

The man in the workshop noticed our arrival and looked up from his work to greet us. There was no mistaking it. He was a tanukin.

"Smick, would it have killed you to do something about the smell?" Goldhus frowned.

"Sorry about that. Was in the middle of some compounding."

"I told you we were coming today. Mis— Luciel, this is Guildmaster Smick. Smick, this is Guildmaster Luciel."

I totally noticed him about to call me "mister" there. Oh well.

"Nice to meet you, Guildmaster. I'm Luciel, S-rank healer," I greeted him. "I really appreciate you taking the time to meet me."

"I've heard a lot about you. Call me Smick. I run things here."

“I’m hoping for good things to come from our relationship. We can heal all sorts of things, but not disease, so I’m looking forward to your involvement in the medical district.”

“Likewise. But what’s that about a medical district?” The tanukin tilted his head, looking like a tacky ornament. It almost fazed me, but I maintained my composure.

“It was decided at last month’s council meeting. We’re creating a facility to house both the Healer’s and Doctor’s Guilds at the same time. Did you not hear?”

“Can’t say I have. I spend most of my time down here formulating. The vice guildmaster handled most of that. But I’m sure whoever’s in charge of it now’s heard all about it, so don’t worry.”

Was this guy for real? He was definitely one of those types to never communicate during a group project, then all of a sudden the entire thing’s done. And that would’ve been just fine if he were a simple doctor, but he was supposed to be the guildmaster. How did this place get by? Not that I was one to talk, I guess.

“Well, to summarize, the goal is to create somewhere that everyone suffering from colds to cuts and everything in between can receive care in the same place.”

“Sounds like a good plan. Say, I heard from my nephew Walabis that you’re friends with Galba and Gulgar?”

He was that guy’s uncle? Strange that he didn’t have that same drawling way of speaking. So I guess it was safe to say that wasn’t something all tanukins did.

“Yeah. Back when I stayed in Merratoni, up in Shurule. I owe those two a lot.”

“So you’re familiar with Substance X, then, huh?”

“Intimately. It was made by a sage in the form of a pill, who first called it God’s Lament, but it was liquified when put through a magic device meant to make it infinite. *That* Substance X, right?”

“You know your stuff. Correct. That’s what I’m currently trying to replicate.”

You had to be some kind of mad scientist to want to make that crap. Or in this case, I guess that made him a mad *doctor*.

I decided to be polite. “I hope it works out.”

“When I’ve got my own lament, I’ll finally be able to get those wolf brothers back for the pain they put me through in my youth!” Smick turned to the dragonewt. “I need a mandrake, Goldhus. Fresh. Within five hours of screaming, not a minute more. I’ll pay a platinum for any adventurer who wants the job.”

“I told you the guild won’t allow requests like that. You know how dangerous it is. What if it causes another stampede?” Goldhus rebuked.

“Wait, why do you have a grudge against Gulgar and Galba?” I asked.

“You see,” Smick explained, “Crya the Divine made me a doctor at my coming-of-age ceremony, but I wasn’t always the recluse I am today. One day, my nephew made the wolf brothers angry, and just as Gulgar was about to force-feed Walabis a special recipe made out of Substance X, I stepped in.”

He had guts to try and stand in the way of those two, especially when they were angry. I pretty much knew where this was going.

Smick went on. “When I asked why they were bullying the poor guy, they told me Walabis had been selling things to children who looked up to the pair, things my nephew had been claiming belonged to them. And some of them actually *were* their personal belongings.”

“Uh, yeah, I think I’d be mad too,” I said.

“I agree. We tanukins are a little mischievous sometimes, but he definitely crossed a line. Ultimately, Walabis ate the food and passed out.”

An eye for an eye, eh? It sounded like Gulgar and Galba were a little mischievous themselves, pulling out Substance X over a prank. Yenice’s local hatred of the substance could likely be traced all the way back to Gulgar himself.

“Gulgar had made enough servings to cover everyone hurt by Walabis’s tricks,” Smick continued. “He said he would forgive my nephew if every plate were licked clean, so I picked up a fork.”

“Awfully nice of you.”

“Oh no, I just couldn’t back out after I went and butted in, you know? We never managed to finish it all, but the brothers let us off easy on condition Walabis never pull that stunt again.”

“I still don’t get where your grudge comes from.”

“We’re getting there. So after all that, my girlfriend dumped me because I smelled so bad! And then the guild locked me down here for the same reason! And now I *still* stink because I’m around reeking herbs all day!”

You’ve got to be kidding me.

“I’m struggling to see how that was anyone’s fault but your own. I mean, Walabis was the one who ticked off Gulgar and Galba in the first place. And no one *told you* to eat the Substance X.”

“Wait a minute.” Smick looked greatly distressed. “You’ve got a point. They might’ve even tried to stop me, now that I think about it. But then what the hell have I been doing with my life?”

Clearly not running a guild...

“*Purification*,” I said, casting my go-to spell. The pungent odors stuck to Smick’s person vanished.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Sorry, you just looked like you were about to lose it. I really think you need to add some ventilation down here. Is there anything here that’s sensitive to magic?”

“Uh, no?”

I cast another Purification, and the various smells in the air dissipated.

“That’s incredible, Mis— Luciel! It’s completely odorless now,” Goldhus said admiringly, then went pale when he noticed the glance I shot him for continuing to screw up my name. I could see the Substance X-colored fear in his eyes.

I looked back at Smick. “Whatever your motive was, you’ve still been concocting medicine for years, and that’s a whole lot harder than casting spells.

It takes dedication and patience; qualities you clearly have.”

“You... You think so?”

“Plus, think about it. How do you plan on making those two eat or drink anything they don’t want? It’s impossible. I’m absolutely positive they’d wind up making *you* take it.” The guildmaster started to hyperventilate. “But it’s okay now. You’ve realized your mistake. And that time you’ve spent down here won’t go to waste. This time, we’ll use it for good. For other people.”

He muttered a quiet “Yeah.” Just barely audible to me alone.

I thought about sending Gulgar and Galba a letter about all this, but it was ancient history now. It wouldn’t have surprised me if they’d forgotten all about it.

Later, a calm and motivated Smick once again pleaded with Goldhus.

“I just need a mandrake. I could make a potion that could recover both injuries *and* magic if I had one!”

I looked at Lionel and Ketty. They nodded.

“All right. Here.” I pulled out a mandrake from my bag—the one Kefin had pulled out by accident.

“Th-That can’t be... Can it?”

“A fresh mandrake. Not even an hour post-scream. Consider it a symbol of our new friendship.”

“I can’t believe it!”

“I expect you to be well-informed about what’s going on in the medical district from now on.”

“Right, but first I need to get to work. Let’s meet again soon!”

The tanukin happily trotted away, deep into the back of the workshop. The rest of us smiled at each other. Our work here was evidently done.

On our way out, I wondered how many people at the guild hated my guts, but based on Ketty’s smirk, I could guess it had been quite a few. That would solve

itself as we started working in the same building, I was sure. We weren't stealing anyone's jobs or anything, so they had no valid reason to dislike us. With things with Smick going so well, I considered having a professional dinner with the Healer's, Doctor's, and Adventurer's Guilds together. To deepen relations and all that.

After making it back to the Healer's Guild, I reported to Jord and prepared to head back to the forest the next day.

09 — Migrating the Vespians

The next day, we left for the southern forest at around the same time as our last outing and arrived with no issues. I decided to use the opportunity to make use of the hermit key.

“Mind heading inside for me, Forêt?”

I envisioned a door, let magic flow into the key, and turned it. Suddenly, the door became reality and swung open, revealing an entire stable inside. I had tried it once before, and it blew me away every time. It was a horse’s dream, complete with food, places to sleep and exercise, and even a massage room. Our steeds (aside from Forêt, that is) had seemed hesitant and confused at first, but quickly relaxed once they realized it was safe inside. Aside from Forêt. She never liked being inside it, and this time was no exception.

We didn’t have much time to waste, and I was afraid of upsetting the only horse to ever let me ride, so I compromised.

“If we’re doing this and you really want to come with me, I need you to promise to behave. Can you do that?”

She firmly nodded.

“That’s a clever mare,” Lionel commented.

“Maybe she’s bred from some kinda war horse line,” Ketty wondered.

Forêt immediately reared her legs up at her.

“Whoa, easy, girl! Ketty, apologize.”

I knew Forêt hated being treated like a simple beast, but she never got *this* angry. Maybe she was especially stressed out because of not getting to exercise for so long. She was a strange horse, that was for sure. No one but her would put on that much of a show.

“Hey, I didn’t mean nothin’ by it!” Ketty bowed. “Forgive me?”

“Oh, if I must!” Forêt brayed. Or that was what it sounded like at least. I realized I should probably let everyone know the situation, to prevent similar

issues in the near future.

“I know some of you probably have second thoughts about taking her with us,” I announced. “But she’s smarter than she looks. She’s made that plenty clear in the time I’ve known her, so I trust she won’t get in anyone’s way. Everyone got that?”

“Understood!” they replied. I got the feeling that they were mostly keeping their opinions to themselves, though. I whispered to Forêt to prove them wrong, and we entered the forest.

Our group consisted of the same people as last time, plus Honeur and his attendants. I hesitated slightly when it came to bringing the elves but figured it wouldn’t hurt to give them a second chance. Ketty had, strangely enough, been all for it as well. So we ended up taking the girls along, under Lionel’s watchful eye.

Prince Honeur led us directly to the colony, and we arrived in no time.

“I’ll go report. We’ll be back shortly,” he announced, flying up to a nest hanging overhead with the other vespians.

I turned to the elves. “That thing that guided us last time. A leshy, was it? Are we not going to see it this time? And is the Spirit of Tides speaking to any of you right now?”

“We’ve seen and heard nothing so far,” Lycian said.

None of them wanted to lose their slave crests anymore, so the three had asked if they could be on spirit and sprite surveillance duty, which I had no problem with, considering I was the one who’d told them I would hold them all liable if one slipped up.

“Got it. Let me know if anything happens.”

The plan was to split into three groups. Lionel, Ketty, Honeur, Dhoran, Milphene, and I were on tree transplanting duty. Pola, Lycian, and Team Yulbo would gather lumber and magic stones from any monsters we encountered. Creia and Kefin’s men were going to watch our backs (and the air, just to be safe) for any enemies who might’ve been tailing us. I knew we needed more magic stones than this would afford us but ultimately decided to do what I did

best: prioritize safety. As they say, slow and steady wins the race. And they had to say that for a reason, right?

“Sir Sage!” the prince called out happily. “We have approval. Once we’ve chosen our trees to transplant, thirty percent of the colony, about forty vespians, will join us. Does that sound agreeable to you?”

He was like some excited new homeowner, itching to show off the new place to his friends. It was kind of entertaining. But I had to make sure they knew what they were getting into.

“That’s fine by me, but they know this won’t be safe, right?”

“Of course! We’re well aware. I did want to ask if we might be able to construct hives beneath your guild.”

Where else were they planning on building those things? Not that I had any intention of declining. I’d meant to give them permission before.

“Do whatever you need to make yourselves comfortable. I expected more people to get involved, so there’s room to expand. Just be aware you won’t be making any trips back home for a while once everyone’s there.”

Obviously, I needed to provide a safe environment for these people, but exactly *how* to do that wasn’t so clear. As much as I would’ve liked the entire colony to move, I knew that would be asking too much. Most of the vespians joining us were relatively young. Many others had spent their entire lives in these woods. Given I was taking away an entire generation of their people, I had a responsibility now, to make sure this project was a success.

We got to work. The vespians selected trees in need of moving, Milphene spoke to them and shifted their roots while Dhoran lifted the earth, and I stashed them in the magic bag. Kefin’s team, along with either Lionel or Ketty, jumped into action at Forêt Noire’s signal, earning her everyone’s recognition at last.

And then it was over. We’d achieved our objective and acquired the plants we needed with almost disappointing ease.

“All right. Vespians, it might be a little cramped, but hop into the carriage,” I called out.

We were off to Yenice. I was well within my rights to bring the vespians into the city, since yesterday's contract had given the guild freedom over producing and selling wares, but you could never be too careful. After all, sweet, sugary honey was liable to draw all manner of hungry insects.

Meanwhile, oblivious to my oh-so-brilliant metaphor, Ketty was on the alert.

"Don't sense anyone watching this time. Must be 'cause the sun hasn't set."

"I hope it stays that way," I said.

"What's tomorrow's plan?" Lionel asked.

"We're going to the labyrinth to get some magic stones. I expect to be there for only half a day, but it could be a bit sparse now that it's been conquered. It's possible we'll spend the night there."

"A fine idea," he agreed. "Let's not forget to have Nalia prepare our meals."

"We've got a full map this time, so you might even get to show your claws a bit, Chief!" Ketty suggested.

"We'll see."

We returned to Yenice soon after.

*

I found myself remembering something. About the Spirit of Tides, and how it had told me I'd come to the forest too soon. This visit, however, was less eventful. Perhaps contact with the spirits wasn't such an easy thing to make. It seemed we'd be left with more questions than answers for some time still.

We entered the Healer's Guild directly through the first floor basement, carriage and all, to hide the vespians' presence.

"We're here," I said to them. "This is only the first floor, so if you'll follow me, I'll show you to the third."

The bee folk glanced all around, marveling at their surroundings. Some looked utterly flabbergasted and muttered about doubts.

"Wait until you see the third floor," Honeur boasted. "This is nothing!"

His people hesitantly followed us down, but by the second floor, they were

practically bundles of flying curiosity. Then we made it to the third floor.

“This will be your new home and workplace,” I announced.

Pure, stunned silence followed. I certainly couldn’t blame them. How often did you go downstairs only to find a second sun and pastures filled with fields?

“We’ll get the trees and seeds planted accordingly. Make yourselves comfortable. I’ll do what I can to help.”

The vespians seemed to all come together, brimming with sudden enthusiasm for their new haven, then all at once cried, “Thank you, Sir Sage!”

“Let’s make this happen.”

With the mood properly set, replanting began. Dhoran did the heavy lifting, while Milphene used her own spirit magic to ensure the process left the fruit trees with minimal stress. It went without a hitch, thanks to all the forest soil we’d brought along. Dhoran quietly returned to his workshop when everything was finished.

“Guess it takes more than that to motivate him,” I wondered aloud. “He did good work, though.”

I had given him seventy percent of the magic stones we’d obtained in the forest, but it didn’t even break the triple digits, so I imagined he wasn’t exactly satisfied.

“Grandpa only gets quiet when he’s in a good mood,” Pola replied, looking unmistakably disgruntled.

“You and Lycian have too many crazy ideas. Narrow it down to what you think might be useful to the most people.”

“Very well,” Lycian said, popping up behind us out of nowhere. She and Pola disappeared into the latter’s workshop.

“Those two sure make good friends,” I muttered.

I looked over the smiling vespians, pleased and ready to get our hands on those magic stones tomorrow. Little did I know of the traces left in the Flame Dragon’s Labyrinth of Will that we were about to stumble upon. Traces left by the Wicked One.

*

After dinner the previous day, I put together an employment contract for the new vespians. A real one this time. No more verbal promises.

The first point covered wages: they would be provided with three meals and shelter, but they had to abide by the prescribed rate of payment. Second: any outings into the city above would only be done with permission, even in emergencies. For the time being, though, all outings were forbidden until the state was more stable. Third: they would have one day off per week. And fourth: they were to get along peacefully with other races if others came to work in their space as well. After a half-year trial period, if a viable production of honey had been established, they could be employed on a more permanent basis.

There had been no objections, and they were probably hard at work by now. I, on the other hand, was on my way to the labyrinth to acquire magic stones, accompanied by Lionel, Ketty, Team Kefin, and Team Yulbo. Lionel and Ketty were a given, of course, but any time I went outside the city, I tended to take two of the three regiments that made up Kefin's slave team. I'd thought Ketty had ordered Kefin's regiment to monitor the rabbit-folk today, though.

"Weren't Verdel's men supposed to be joining us today?" I asked Kefin.

The teams often switched places and shuffled around. I had been asked if they were allowed to do so today and had told them yes, but the ride to the labyrinth was boring. So I figured I'd ask what the deal was.

"Quite a few of Verdel's boys've taken a shine to the slaves Nalia's been teaching. They asked to stay behind to watch the guild," he replied.

"What about the rabbit-folk?"

"Bet they split up," Ketty cut in. "But they better not have, if they know what's good for 'em."

"Oh, to be young. Gotta savor those feelings while you can," I sighed longingly.

"You're only twenty yourself, Chief."

“I do hear those in the Church tend to act older than their years, but you still have time to ripen,” Lionel quipped.

Way to overgeneralize, although, I *had* read that paper all that time ago. Substance X was supposed to slow down the alleged aging that came with Church-related classes. Suddenly, my hiatus from the substance started looking a lot more temporary. Wait, I was supposed to quip back, wasn't I? Well, crap, the labyrinth had already come into view.

“That sucks,” I muttered as I lowered myself down from Forêt's back.

Before heading in, I used the hermit key and gestured for the horses to go inside. Forêt reluctantly acquiesced this time. Good thing I'd had that talk with her about the dangers of labyrinths.

I addressed everyone one last time. “We're following the map and pushing right on through, as far as we can go. Expect there to be fewer monsters, but don't let your guard down.”

“Understood!”

We once again headed into the Labyrinth of Will.

10 — Anomalies in the Labyrinth of Will

“Is it just me, or are there just as many monsters as last time?”

“No. There are even more,” Lionel answered me.

“There’s definitely a lot of ’em, but they’re not all that different from before,” Ketty added.

“But what *is* different worries me,” I said.

We’d been up against far more opposition than our first time here from the moment we entered, albeit without any scouts clearing the path for us.

“Labyrinths are supposed to weaken once someone’s traversed them in their entirety, right?”

No one answered. The slight taint of undead corruption visible on the monsters in our path was another cause for concern, but it was anyone’s guess as to what in the world was happening. I simply purified our foes and hoped the increase in hostility would make our magic stone quota that much easier to reach.

We ascended quickly, checking the map as we proceeded at about five minutes per floor, it felt like. The monsters proved ineffective against us. Despite the obvious change in our enemies, however, the labyrinth’s layout remained the same. We reached the tenth floor in a little over an hour, gathering gems along the way.

“Everything seems fine, but don’t forget, safety first, everyone.”

The team grinned at my usual spiel and nodded.

The boss room produced three red-lizardmen, one of which was undead. I swiftly took care of our undead foe with Purification, while Kefin and Yulbo’s team did away with the other two just as quickly.

“Lionel’s training’s worked wonders on you guys, huh?” I remarked.

Lionel and Ketty looked a tad disappointed. No doubt because they had wanted to take part in the fighting, but, unfortunately, I sympathized very little.

And up we went.

“It’s starting to seem like the higher we go, the more undead we find,” I said.

“So it would seem,” Lionel agreed. “But it does make for easy practice for you. Their speed drops considerably.”

“Sure, but I haven’t leveled up once since we got here.”

“Hey, you beat a dragon,” Ketty said. “No wonder the small fry don’t do it for you anymore.”

Leveling was going to get a lot harder from now on if that was the case. Then was it back to Substance X? Of course, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, right? I was conflicted.

The twentieth floor boss room held two red-orcs and a large fire-wolf, but I didn’t get a chance to shine there. Lionel slew a red-orc, Ketty decapitated the wolf, and Kefin’s group took care of the other orc with careful, coordinated strikes.

“It couldn’t have been that tough, could it?” I asked.

Kefin and his men could have surely taken out an orc easier than that. On their own, even. Or at least, I sure hoped so, because those guys were way stronger than me.

“We were working some things out. Making sure we’re in sync,” Kefin said. “It’s gonna get tougher from here on out, and hell if I’m gonna let us hold you guys back like last time.”

The others nodded in agreement.

“All right, then that’s fine. Safety first.”

I smiled and headed straight for the next staircase. Fast forward to the twenty-fifth floor...

“You’ve become rather assertive in ascending the floors,” Lionel commented.

“I have no desire to ever go into these things on my own again, but you all seem to be enjoying yourselves. And I trust you, after all. Plus, I hear stronger monsters give more potent magic stones that are better for artificing and stuff,

and you can never have too many.”

I marched up the stairs with a smirk and an exaggerated gait. Our opponents in the thirtieth floor boss room were a fire-bear and a wraith. Upon spotting the latter, I reflexively shot off Purification without thinking. The wraith instantly dissolved into a single gem. Fortunately, no one seemed to have fallen under its effects.

The fire-bear left a few knicks here and there on Kefin’s men but still didn’t stand a chance. When the room was clear, we took a break.

“No doubt about it. That was a wraith. What was up on the fortieth floor again? Goldhus said it was originally a chimera, right?”

“Right, but really, you took out that wraith like it was nothin’,” Ketty praised. “You’re somethin’ else.”

“Yes, I agree,” Lionel said. “It’s no wonder you’ve become S-rank at such a young age.”

“Well, we go back. They’re nothing to me anymore, and their magic doesn’t do a thing to me. But they did almost get me one time.”

“How so?” Ketty asked.

“I can handle them well enough alone, but not when they make the people around me go into a frenzy and they start attacking me. And that condition continues even after you take out the monster, so my team was in chaos until I managed to cast Recover.”

Once, before coming to Yenice, I’d brought the Order to the Labyrinth of Trials for a bit of hands-on training. The mind magic of a wraith was not to be underestimated. I had thought it was all over when the knights started going crazy.

“I see. That explains your reflexes,” Lionel mused, rubbing his beard.

“Anyway, let’s enjoy that lunch Nalia went through the trouble of making,” I said, pulling out said meal from the magic bag.

I’d forgotten to purify the room, so I told the others to dig in while I went

around and did that. No one had died back in the Labyrinth of Trials, and no one had quit the Order, but I still couldn't help but worry about things. Still, I brushed my unease to the side long enough to savor lunch.

From floor thirty-one, not a single undead monster appeared. Something about this place wasn't right, but we marched on, continuing without difficulty straight to the fortieth floor.

"What's going on here?" Kefin suddenly spoke up. "Where is everyone?"

"Where's who?" I asked.

"The basecamp was here, S-ran—sir. Where are the adventurer hunters? The sweepers should be right here!"

"Maybe they ditched because the monsters changed and stopped being profitable?"

"I'm not so sure."

Kefin started to lose his cool, but finally calmed down after Lionel admonished his lack of composure.

My bad feeling only got worse. A labyrinth that should have been on the downturn seemed more active than ever, and it was teeming with the undead. And now there were missing adventurers.

"It couldn't be," I murmured. "You all remember the large magic stone on the fifty-first floor that I left, right?" Everyone nodded. "I wonder if the sweepers made it up to the fiftieth and messed with it."

"But you said you needed the dragons' blessing to even see the door," Kefin argued. "I doubt any of them had anything like that."

"I was told that I could only reach that room once. In which case, it would make sense for the things I left to be moved to the fiftieth floor, right? Including the gem."

"You're kidding."

"I think it's very likely that someone fiddled with the magic stone. I never touched it myself because my gut told me not to. Or rather, my Monster Luck skill told me so."

It had become increasingly clear to me that an unseen enemy was stirring. And as the leader, I was forced to consider the terrifying possibility that their identity was none other than the Wicked One. I had to make a decision: continue on or turn back.

I felt everyone's eyes on me. I had no doubt that they would obey any order I gave. Beyond those doors could have been a chimera and other undead atrocities beside. But I didn't have the strength to lead people towards what might be their graves.

I dithered. "We're looking at the possibility of a chimera as well as wraiths inside that room." I couldn't make this decision alone, so I sought other opinions. The final responsibility lay with me, and I didn't intend to push that onto others, but I simply couldn't decide their fate alone.

Lionel regarded me, studying me as if he could see through my thoughts. "You would normally order our retreat without question. What makes you hesitate?"

"Normally, yeah, I'd go home without a second thought, but..." I wavered. "But if we leave things like this, I have this feeling the labyrinth's only going to grow and get worse until the monsters are so strong that no one can get near the place. I don't have any proof of that, or that we can do anything about it, but something tells me we can."

"Then let's get goin'," Ketty decided.

"We'll go with what you think is right," Kefin agreed.

"Trust in your judgment. If you decide it wise to retreat, then retreat we will."

I never thought I'd hear Lionel say he would willingly back out of a fight. I paused, then ultimately concluded, "We're leaving as soon as it gets too dangerous. We'll prop open the door with some lumber. If this chimera causes any strange effects or anyone notices anything odd, tell me immediately."

"Understood!" everyone answered.

Having steeled our resolve, we forged ahead.

We opened the door to the fortieth floor boss room and stepped inside, propping it open behind us with a couple of hunks of lumber.

“Let’s do this,” I said.

When we reached the center of the dim room, light suddenly illuminated the area, and I prepared to launch a Purification spell at any undead foes, but only five flaming saber-tooth tigers stood in our way. Slightly startled, I sized them up. One was about all I could realistically take, and by ‘take’ I meant hold back until Lionel or somebody else came to the rescue. Dhoran, Pola, and Verdel’s team weren’t here this time, though.

One of the tigers suddenly bared its teeth and leaped at me in my stupefied state. Somehow—likely on pure instinct—I found myself with the Holy Dragon spear in my hand, and a moment later its tip had squarely impaled the tiger’s open maw, just centimeters from me. Had I reacted a second later, those few centimeters wouldn’t have been much help. All I could do was offer thanks to Monsieur Luck for making the monster such an easy target.

The beast fell to the ground as a magic stone, and I glanced at the other battles raging around me. Or rather, *had been* raging. Lionel and Ketty were already done, while Kefin’s team had just about wrapped up.

“You do that all by yourself?” Ketty teased. “Nice goin’, Dragonslayer.”

“A simple healer no longer,” Lionel sneered.

“Please, you two beat me up in training every day,” I shot back. “You know I’m not that strong.”

“Hey, when the going gets tough, I’d say you are,” Ketty replied.

“And that’s the only time it matters,” Lionel added. “Given another ten years, I shudder in excitement to imagine what you’ll be capable of.”

Poor guy must’ve been cold, because I sure didn’t know what the heck made him so excited, and I didn’t care to find out. That’s called foreshadowing, and I didn’t mess around with it.

“Sure. Anyway, it’s strange that we haven’t found a single undead monster since floor thirty-one. It’s almost like the labyrinth is rebuilding itself or something.”

The smirks left my companions’ faces. I wasn’t alone in thinking that.

“What are your orders?” Lionel asked.

“We’ll keep gathering magic stones, as planned.” I paused. “Then we’ll check out the fiftieth floor and leave through the magic circle. Maybe we’ll walk back. We’ll have to see.”

“Got it,” Ketty said. “Oh, look who’s just about done.”

Kefin’s men had finished taking down their enemy. Numbers and careful coordination were the keys to their strategy.

“They seemed more certain than in the last battle,” Lionel commented.

“I make ’em do what they can by themselves. Looks like it works wonders,” his comrade replied.

“Make them do what they can...” I parroted to myself.

After tending to injuries, we made our way up the stairs. The undead were still nowhere to be seen. There were a few more monsters than last time, but with our completed map, we made short work of each floor, reaching the fiftieth floor boss room safely and easily in about five hours.

“Well, that doesn’t look pleasant,” Ketty remarked.

“It’s thicker than our last visit,” Lionel added.

“I can see the miasma seeping out. I think I should be able to purify it from here,” I said.

“Agreed.”

I took out the ingredients for dinner, handing them off to Kefin’s group, then visualized the inner chamber and got to purifying while they prepared the meal. After numerous casts towards the door, I envisioned a magic circle within the chamber itself and began casting within it. Several Purifications and Sanctuary Circles later, the miasma stopped creeping through.

“I’m going to keep purifying today. Tomorrow we’ll take a look inside,” I announced. “I’m not confident we’ll get lucky twice if there’s another red dragon in there.”

“After you’ve had dinner,” Lionel corrected. “If you leave some Substance X in

the vicinity, Ketty and I can continue gathering gems with Kefin and his men in the meantime.”

“Right, okay. I’ll get some sleep once my magic gets low. You guys don’t push yourselves too hard, and rest in shifts. Tomorrow’s not going to be any easier.”

“Understood!” everyone cried.

Once the Substance X was placed in the hallway to keep the baddies out, I pictured the boss room sparkly clean and started casting again. Kefin and Ketty took the first sleep shift while Lionel and Yulbo’s team set out to fight monsters.

I continued to cast, my hand on the door, clearing my mind and praying that my spells would penetrate the fog. And then I realized something—in the past, I had always cast magic with a clear image of the result in mind, but lately I had fallen out of the habit. Was it proof of how used to the motions I’d become? Or was it complacency?

I knew at once that it could only be the latter. The only reason I had gotten my Holy Magic skill to such a high level was because I could see the number rise, not because of natural talent. Sure, I had put in effort, but I was self-aware enough to know that I wasn’t the most skilled guy around. I promised myself that once my business in Yenice was complete, I would take a week off in Merratoni to have Brod retrain me.

“I really don’t have the right to be leading people the way I am,” I muttered. “I’ve gotta try harder.”

Just then, I felt my magic start to run low, so I pulled out my angel’s pillow and went to sleep.

*

Lionel and the others were gone when I woke up, but Ketty was there along with Kefin’s team. His men had a few cuts and bruises.

“Sorry. I’m up now. Gather round and I’ll cast Area Heal.” I did so, plus Area Barrier, then took in the situation. “How long was I out? When did everyone get back?”

“We’re swapping every three hours,” Ketty explained. “Sir Lionel just left on

his second trip.”

Some nap that was. No wonder I felt so rested.

“So I was asleep for about five hours, huh? Anything new with the labyrinth?”

“Nope. Quite a few monsters, though.”

There could be no question at this point that the dungeon was reactivating. And considering how it had progressed to floor thirty, things were only going to get worse.

“Got it. You guys get some sleep. Or is anyone hungry?” They were not. “All right, I’ll wake you up when Lionel’s party gets back.”

My magic had completely recovered by then, so I decided to do a bit more purifying, leaving eighty percent or so of my power for later. As I did, I thought I heard the sounds of battle. Was Lionel nearby? But by the sound of all the metal on metal, they could’ve been attacking each other.

As I opened my eyes, concern welling up inside me, I caught sight of the man himself, returning with Yulbo. His team was a little scratched up, so I quickly healed them all.

“I heard the fighting. What happened?” I asked.

“Fighting?” Lionel looked puzzled. “We heard no such thing.”

It couldn’t have come from the boss room...could it? If so, that could only mean someone was locked in combat with something formidable, like I had been against the lich knight.

“How many stones did you guys get?”

“Counting Ketty’s, two hundred or so.”

We had already gotten our hands on a thousand stones on our way there. Including the two hundred, we were at about sixty percent of the total we needed. I figured it was now or never.

“I’m going to open the door in six hours. We’ll look inside, and if it’s dicy, we’re retreating and having the Adventurer’s Guild take care of it. No heroics. Stop me if I try anything stupid.”

“As you command. No harm will come to you,” he replied passionately.

I patted his shoulder and told them all to get some sleep. I let them get as much rest as they needed, then when everyone was up, we had breakfast, where I let the others know what I had told Lionel.

Then I opened the door.

Inside, we found the sweepers.

“They’re undead,” Ketty said.

There was no dragon, but there was also no magic circle waiting to send us to the entrance.

“Healerrr!” one of them shrieked. “Save us, S-raaank!”

It was a nightmare. Their ghoulish, glowing crimson eyes set in sheet-white faces conjured up images of the death knights from the Labyrinth of Trials.

“They’re lost to us!” Lionel shouted, standing between me and the creatures. “Cleanse them with your magic or we cut them down! You must choose!”

“They’re emitting miasma! They’re monsters!” Ketty yelled, stepping forward with the rest.

I trembled terribly. If I purified these people, these *things*, their lives would end. Whatever was left of them. In the truest sense of the word. I would be nothing more than a killer. The mere thought almost made me retch.

“Aren’t S-rank healers supposed to save people?”

“The pain! Stop the pain!”

“Gya ha ha ha ha! Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!”

“Die! *Die!*”

“Curse you, S-rank! Curse you, Goldhus! You did this!”

“Where will our souls go?”

Although some of them had gone mad, the adventurers weren’t dead. I simply couldn’t believe it. They moved and spoke like they still had conscious wills.

“High Heal!”

I fired a spell at the closest one. As long as it didn't hurt him, there was a chance it could save him. But fate wasn't going to give me an easy way out.

The adventurer howled in pain. I had tested this all the way back in the Church's labyrinth. I knew all too well how susceptible the undead were to healing magic, and sadly, that seemed to hold true no matter how far into the corruption process they were. I had expected as much, but it still frustrated me. Painfully so. Still, there was no time to linger on the feeling.

I glanced at Lionel and Ketty. They were actually struggling. Kefin's men had been driven into a corner. Apologizing in my heart for my helplessness, I channeled as much power as I could into a single spell and cast Purification. The adventurer before me vanished instantly, flesh, bone, blood, and all, as if he had been an illusion, leaving only his armor and equipment as proof he had been there.

I looked back at the others. Lionel and Ketty had not been pushed to their limit as I had initially thought. They had simply been awaiting my judgment: whether to slay the undead or rescue the adventurers, holding the enemy back without leaving so much as a single scratch on them. Not even fighters strong enough to ascend the entire labyrinth, powered up by undead corruption, were enough to take them down.

Kefin's group wasn't doing so well, though. They were in dire straits. I had to give it up and prioritize the lives of my friends and companions. I fired off a Purification at the remaining adventurers with all my might.

The bright light swept away the purple, miasmic fog, drowning the monstrous adventurers and transforming them into magic stones in a sea of death rattles. But only the final words of Lionel's opponent reached me.

“You... You left us for the Wicked One. You're...next!”

The vengeful words stuck in my ears, refusing to fade for some time. Soon, aside from the magic stones, only the adventurers' gear and guild cards remained.

“Nobody touch those stones! Especially the one in the middle!” I shouted.

A brilliant gem now gleamed in the center of the room, but my gut told me the gorgeous display was a portent of danger. The adventurers' stones also shone with beauty incomparable to any magic stone I had previously laid eyes on.

Once everything but the stones had been collected, I cast Purification and Recover on everyone, then healed our wounds. My trembling never stopped. Whatever had happened in this dungeon remained a mystery. We had far more questions than answers here. But I was sure of one thing: this had been a trap laid by someone with power. One with the power to seal away even the Eternal Dragons. The Wicked One.

We stepped into the newly glowing circle and were transported to the labyrinth's entrance, but the trembling still wouldn't stop.

As the sun thawed my frozen body, the blood returned to my limbs and, gradually, I stopped shaking. The others looked at me with concern but kept their distance. I appreciated their consideration.

I used the hermit key and opened the door. The first thing Forêt Noire did upon seeing me was bite the absolute hell out of my head.



“Ow, ow, ow! Forêt, that hurts!”

“Get a hold of yourself!” she seemed to bray.

Jolted by my partner’s warning, I looked around at everyone’s worried faces. What was I doing? Lionel had been so quiet because it was *my* job to rally the team, not his.

I took a deep breath, calmed myself, and addressed the group.

11 — The End of the Slums

We headed straight for the Adventurer's Guild upon returning to town. Kefin and his group left with the horses to report the situation to Dolstar.

"What's happened?" Jeiyas asked a second faster than his brother next to him.

"The labyrinth was slowly reviving itself," I said plainly. "Simply put, it was active again."

"What?!"

Goldhus leaned forward. "How is it now?"

"Well, we reconquered it. But that's oversimplifying it. The problem doesn't end there."

"But you've conquered it again?" Jeiyas confirmed.

"Yes, but there weren't just the usual monsters inside. There were undead variants as well."

"Go on."

I placed the adventurers' guild cards on the table. "They were on the fiftieth floor. Where the dragon used to be. They were undead."

"This wouldn't happen to be some kind of practical joke, would it?"

"I wouldn't be here otherwise. We found immense amounts of miasma leaking from the floor's main chamber. My guess is they fell victim to it."

"A trap? But that's impossible! I've never even *heard* of a trap like that!" Goldhus exclaimed.

"One of the adventurers... He said something, just before being destroyed by my Purification spell. He cursed me and Goldhus for sacrificing him to the Wicked One."

"The Wicked One?!" the brothers cried in unison.

“Is there nothing we can do to keep the labyrinth quiet?” Jeiyas asked.

“I have no idea,” I admitted. “But I think it’s possible the gem that appeared on the highest floor when I cleared the main chamber has something to do with why it’s active again.”

“The core?”

“Yes, I guess that’s a good way to put it. It could be that someone mishandled it. But that sort of thing is beyond me, which is why I brought it up to you.”

“To warn us.”

“Right. Fighting is what adventurers do. This isn’t for me to solve, so I’m deferring to you.”

Silence fell. Some time passed before Jeiyas finally broke it. “Thank you for the information. We’ll need some time to consider everything. We may come to you regarding it again, if that’s okay.”

“Understood. I’ll pray that things go well.”

“We’ll let the Healer’s Guild know at once if we hear of any changes in the situation.”

In all honesty, I would have been totally fine with them keeping that information to themselves, but I had to play nice.

“Thank you. Until then.”

With my business taken care of, we returned to the Healer’s Guild.

Beneath the guildhall, I found Verdel and his men helping to build houses under Dhoran’s supervision. For...some reason.

“Uh, what’s going on here?” I asked.

“Knights said they’d handle guard duty and lent the fellas to me,” Dhoran said.

“Well, that’s fine and all. I’ve been thinking you’re understaffed for a while now. But I thought they were supposed to be doing surveillance on the rabbit-folk? I never got any report about this.”

Ketty was utterly emotionless. Translation: she was *pissed*. There was going to be hell far worse than the Milphene incident to pay for this. But we did have to consider that we'd been out in the labyrinth for a while, and I sort of felt sorry for the poor souls.

"We're very sorry," Verdel said.

"Just, if someone asks you to do something while you're already on another job, I want you to communicate. Part of the blame lies with me this time for not preventing this from happening in the first place, though."

That said, between house building and a vital stealth mission, their priorities were definitely in the wrong place. But if I came down too hard on them for it, it would stunt their ability to think for themselves in the future.

"So let's do this to keep it from happening again," I continued. "We'll make a board where we can post notices and schedules. Of course, there will be no 'personal adjustments' to anything posted. Or *all of you* are getting a mug of Substance X."

The team cried out in agony and disbelief.

"Don't like it? I can always take you to a slaver, and you can find a new master."

There. With a bit of cruelty, maybe I could spare them whatever fate Ketty would have had in store for them.

"Please, sir, anything but that."

Verdel, however, seemed to have taken it a little too seriously. He stepped forward and bowed.

"You don't need to apologize. You did screw up this time, so that's a mug. But I'll have one with you. Fair's fair, after all. I did cause this by leaving Dhoran short-handed."

"I got plenty o' hands," the dwarf insisted. "Just gets boring buildin' the same thing over 'n over. But I'm buildin'."

"Don't stretch yourself too thin. It's probably going to get harder to find magic stones from here on out, so use them carefully."

“I’ll, eh...sure try.”

That night, Team Verdel and I cracked open a cold one, and by “cracked open” I meant “suffered horribly over,” and by “a cold one” I meant “Substance X.” I let them off the hook after thirty minutes and spared their senses with Purification and some healing magic. Their gratitude was short-lived, however, when they had to then trudge over to Ketty, who apparently raked them over the coals.

I heard Dhoran’s report on his progress, then returned to my office and contacted Her Holiness by arclink crystal.

“Hm. I see. I will learn what I can of the Wicked One. Meanwhile, I will anticipate your very first shipment of honey. I trust you intend to keep that promise.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

The connection ended.

“She brings up the honey every time,” I muttered. “Must be rarer than I thought.”

I picked up a pen and began writing a letter to Merratoni, partly to learn what I could about international prices for honey and sugar, and partly to let them know about my meeting with the tanukin, Smick.

Time passed, split mostly between the southern forest and the Labyrinth of Will, in cycles of one week each. In the forest, we observed and researched fauna, gathered materials, and searched for new species of monsters. In the labyrinth, we ran through the first thirty floors, racking up magic stones. Much to my relief, the place was quieter.

And then, in the blink of an eye, the next month’s council meeting arrived.

“I will be presiding over today’s meeting,” Liliard announced.

The assembly proceeded smoothly, without much of note.

“Next, the matter of the wages that Luciel brought to our attention last time.

Forence, if you would.”

“We found significant disparities between the races, as well as the race responsible for the embezzlement,” the fox-man representative revealed. “The nature of the disparities is a discussion for another time, but as to the responsible party, I think it fit to demand the money be returned. Further punishment can be considered as needed.”

“Y-You’re not going to reveal the race in question?” Liliard stuttered.

“It would only cause panic if this were leaked to the public. So I’ll leave it to your individual discretion whether we ought to expel this person or not.”

Forence was a brutal politician, but I didn’t think that made him the kind of person to commit crimes—especially not ones regarding matters of business. His presence was strong, but not in a bad way.

At this rate, though, it was probably wise to consider the possibility of public outcry. And the offending individual was more than likely a high-ranking government official, so preparations would need to be made for a replacement who could handle the scandal it was going to create.

“Th-Then let’s move on to the medical district, Representative.”

“Of course. The tiger-folk and dragonewts have offered some of their territory for the sake of the medical district’s land. My own people will do so as well. Next, we move to employing workers.”

“Thoughts?” the moderator asked, looking at me.

I shook my head. Forence had updated me in advance already. And I didn’t want to come under fire for controlling the meetings, so I decided to keep quiet this time around.

“Moving on, then,” Liliard proceeded. “This was also tabled by Luciel in our prior meeting. The rumors of monsters atop the cliffs to the west. Representative Thouzer, the floor is yours.”

“Apologies, but I couldn’t find the adventurers you were after,” he said. “I will continue my search.”

“Thoughts?”

I shook my head again. I hadn't actually expected him to come up with anything, and as far as I was concerned, it just meant one less avenue for the council to try and trip me up.

"Then to our next order of business: the slums. Luciel?"

All eyes turned to me. They covered me in an iron curtain that no lie or embellishment could ever hope to get past.

I smiled. "Progress is sitting somewhere around thirty percent. Once the residents start work on the medical district, we can begin dismantling the area in earnest."

"You make bold claims without any proof that you have the means to follow through on them," one of the representatives rebuked me.

"Half-breeds or not, Yenice still needs its citizens," another added.

"Frankly, it doesn't seem like you've been doing a thing."

I had figured it was about time for them to start complaining, so I had prepared a little demonstration.

"You all make good points," I conceded. "Will you please follow me into the courtyard?"

I stepped outside, the representatives quietly following me soon after.

"We're currently in the middle of building the adventurers' housing." I summoned an entire building from the magic bag. "This is one such home."

The representatives stared at the structure in wide-eyed amazement. I bet they hadn't expected *that* to fit into a bag.

"We're starting out with fifty of this exact model. Those, plus the schoolhouse, are currently under construction," I explained. "Have I laid your doubts to rest?"

They were wordless in the face of my blinding smile, frozen and utterly unjustified in any snark they dared to think up. You couldn't haze the newbie when the newbie showed results. Even if this had been the only house we'd actually finished, the sheer impact of my display would've been enough to shut them up anyway.

The meeting ended, and I was left with many things to mull over until the next one. From employment terms for the halflings to strategies for dealing with future threats and obstacles.

But all that thinking went to waste when two months flew by without a single threat or obstacle to speak of. Dolstar was dumbfounded by the state of things. His people were being paid fairly and on time, and they were even allowed breaks.

“Watch your back,” he warned. “It’s always calm before the storm.”

“I will. Is everything finished?”

“It’s all ready to go.”

“Good. The slums will be totally gone before it’s time to clock out today.”

“It’s strange. Somehow, I think I’m actually a little attached to that dump.”

“We’ll plan on dismantling anything left behind.”

“Got it. Do your thing, Mister S-rank.”

“Will do.”

Dolstar, along with nearly the entirety of the slum’s population, headed for the medical district. Kefin led the rest away. With the help of Dhoran’s earth magic, Pola’s golem, my magic, and the magic bag, the slum was soon no more. Some of its former residents fell to the ground, wailing, but most of the outsiders only gaped in disbelief. Others stared at me fearfully, intimidated by my decisiveness.

The next day, that fear would turn to shock as they witnessed the smiling faces of former slum dwellers, living happily in their new abodes.

*

I had originally intended for the people to live underground for about three months or so, but someone disagreed: Nalia.

“Public opinion is a difficult thing to change once minds are made up,” she argued. “What you propose is a recipe for disaster. Your reputation would be irreparably damaged across the world.”

“But if that’s what it takes to make sure the plan works...”

“It isn’t. Your efforts would be better spent drawing people to you who seek your help, rather than providing them with fuel to berate you with. And come they will.”

“There’s no way I can satisfy everyone.”

“No, there is not. But you’ve been true to your word so far, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“You have nothing to worry about.” She smiled longingly. “Allies are drawn to those with a greater purpose.”

She looked me straight in the eye and gave a reassuring nod.

*

The following day, an emergency council meeting was called. I had the honor of being the primary point of discussion, to put it lightly.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Jhak spat with a fury I’d never seen in him before. “What the hell are the slum dwellers doing there?!”

For someone so amiable to the strong and those with the dragons’ blessing, the dragonewt clearly had racial biases.

“You said you were eradicating the district,” the tiger-man chimed in, despite his lack of right to speak out of turn.

“What are halflings doing living in such luxury?!” Sebeck cried. Apparently, the very concept of them living in a nicer house than his own was simply too much to bear.

“You played us for fools!” Cathrel seethed, boiling with the same rage as the dog-man. But there was something behind his words that I didn’t quite understand yet. “Where are the adventurers you promised?!”

“An explanation would be greatly appreciated,” Liliard said, his nostrils flared. I couldn’t blame him for loathing me after his little slush fund went and got exposed because of me. Among the flames, though, were genuine and valid concerns.

“Luciel, how did you make something like that so quickly?” Orga asked.

“This is far-reaching, isn’t it?” Forence added. “You must have taken the entire city into consideration for this.”

Thouzer shot up. “The ursans! Is this related to why they’ve been in such good spirits?!”

Silence fell. I calmly raised my index finger. “First, I did promise to get rid of the slums. I think you’ll find that I’ve done exactly that by the cleanliness of the streets.” I gauged everyone’s reactions and lifted another finger. “Second, I have also succeeded in attracting adventurers, by giving former slum dwellers the opportunity to become them. And the greater quality of life in your city will bring even more adventurers to Yenice.”

“Enough with the sophistry. You’ve given handouts to half-breeds,” a representative hissed.

“Who was it who said Yenice needed the halflings two months ago?” I fired back. “My goal is to make this city a nice and safe place to live, and that’s what I’m doing. And yes, I do have plans to build beyond the city limits and attract adventurers from abroad as well.”

My smile never faltered. I had rehearsed for this day and was ready for just about any question they could throw at me.

“Luciel, is there a reason you purchased the entire slum district?” Forence asked quickly.

“Not really. Well, sort of. I just wanted to be allowed to do what I wanted, since no one was being particularly helpful.”

The opposition surely wasn’t finished with their berating, but Forence was quicker. He was always a fast thinker.

“What about the school?” Orga asked timidly, most likely thinking of Sheila.

“It’s still under construction. We need just a little more time,” I answered.

“I’ve noticed you’re getting close with the ursans,” Thouzer commented. “Why?”

“They’ve had it rough, being a minority in the city. So I’ve been helping them

with healing and food whenever I can.”

Honey technically counted as food, right?

“Is that so?”

Thanks to Thouzer’s diversion, the verbal beating came to a reluctant end. Those unsatisfied representatives couldn’t think of anything else worth adding, so the meeting was adjourned. If things had been relatively threat-and obstacle-free before, they sure weren’t going to be now.

I had a lot to think about on the way home that day.

12 — The Blast Heard Around Yenice

The day after the emergency meeting, Sebeck and Cathrel trudged all the way across town just to bow to me.

“I don’t know what you want from me. It’s just not possible right now. We still have to finish building the schoolhouse first.”

They had come to beg for renovations and housing improvements to their own territories.

“That’s perfectly fine. And we don’t mean to ask for anything for free,” the dog-man pleaded.

“We’re always considered second-best to the wolf-and tiger-folk, but that’s purely in fighting ability!” the cat-man implored.

“We dog-folk are far more focused than the wolf-folk. We always keep our word!”

Unfortunately, I had no relevant acquaintances who could back up that claim, but I did trust plenty of wolf-folk, although I had seen reports that they were diligent workers in the fields.

“And we’re not inconsiderate, like the tiger-folk. The cat-people aren’t slackers.”

He had a point with that first comment, but cat-folk were known for being moody at times. And Ketty was loyal and all, so it would have been nice if I could earn some favors by building them houses, but not even *she* trusted other cat-folk.

“Anything you need, Luciel—no, *Mister* Luciel. We’re with you.”

“And the cat-people as well!”

“No ‘mister,’” I said. “And this will have to be farther down the line. If the time comes, we’ll talk again.”

At last, the two went on their way, Sebeck wagging his tail and Cathrel’s pointed straight up. I assumed that meant they were happy?

“Off they go.” Lionel grinned. “And nothing of value was discussed.”

“You’re a mean kitty,” Ketty teased.

They took way too much pleasure in putting me down. It wasn’t my fault those two had gotten their hopes up. All I had promised was that we *might* talk in the future. I mean, yeah, I was gonna try to help them if we could, but still.

“It’s better not to promise things and back ourselves into a corner,” I said. “Ketty, any news on that thing I asked you to do?”

“They were a little iffy at first, but the centaurs, ivoris, taurians, and primatians are in,” she replied.

“Good. Then we’ll proceed with negotiations.”

“Gotcha.” She left the room.

I had finally received replies from Brod, Galba, and Gulgar. Galba had written that his involvement would only end in “control by fear,” so I was supposed to figure things out on my own as best I could, but he did include four letters that would get the banished beast races on our side. So I had sent Ketty and Kefin’s men to meet with each of the leaders, and it seemed to have gone well. But I was still left with a creeping curiosity about the depths of the wolf-man’s influence. A curiosity that, somehow, I knew was best ignored.

“Just in time,” I said in relief.

“We shouldn’t drop our guard just yet, but I believe this means our lives will be less at risk from now on,” Lionel remarked.

It really was nice to not have to worry about a centaur arrow in my skull when I least expected it. Very calming.

“Now I just hope the honey works out.”

“Honneur claims they’ve reached maximum production efficiency.”

“Noted. Her Holiness told me the stuff sells for several gold pieces per cup when I sent her some. It’s so rare that it’s hardly even known around the world.”

“I would assume it’s not a common part of the public’s average diet.”

“It’s even more expensive than sugar.”

According to what I had heard, the vespians had been used as slave labor in the past. When I pointed out the similarities to their current situation to Honeur, I’d been laughed off.

“It’s safe, the air is clear, the honey is plentiful, it’s perfect for raising children! This place is heaven!” he’d raved.

Since adventurers rarely set foot in the forest, there were supposedly too many monsters to reliably have children there. But that wasn’t the case here, underground, and I had given them permission to return to the forest with their families, so everyone was loving life, which was a relief to hear.

Gulgar had asked for some honey for himself in his letter and included information on market rates. Based on them, that tiny, hundred-milliliter bottle I’d given to Bryan went for over one gold, *at least*.

“We have a good deal of inventory at the moment,” Lionel said.

“I don’t want to put it all on the market at once, for the vespians’ sake. It would draw too much attention. I was thinking about selling fruit with it.”

“Forence had quite a look in his eye when he saw the fruit for himself.”

“Right. So even that feels a little...risky. Imagine if he saw us peddling honey.”

We had shared some of our produce with the merchant, and his reaction had been less than subtle, murmuring something about dividends and the profit margin of “such a quality product.” I had been too focused on the crazed look on his face to hear any of it, but Ketty had picked up on it for me. The man was not to be taken lightly.

“Then when does business begin?”

“I think I’ll give it some more thought. We’ll probably get busy again once the school’s done. Speaking of which, I was thinking about making Nalia the headmistress.”

“Nalia? Hm. She’d be a good fit.”

“Glad to hear it. We’ve still got a ton on our plate, but things are starting to take shape, huh?”

“Agreed. And the medical district should be conveniently completed right near the end of your term.”

Lionel shifted restlessly, no doubt because I had told him we would make a trip to Merratoni when we left and he could hardly wait to butt heads with my master again.

“So, be honest: do you think we’re going to be attacked before then?”

“That’s difficult to say, though I wouldn’t be surprised if the tiger-folk had already made their move.”

I sighed. “It is what it is. We’ll see how tomorrow’s trip to the forest goes.”

“We ought to exercise extreme caution.”

“I’m counting on you guys.”

To be honest, we had already gotten all the wood and magic stones we needed for construction. But a trio of individuals who shall not be named were going through those gems like candy. At least they weren’t going to waste. I was having the three of them design potential magic tools for beastfolk, then letting them make whatever they wanted if they came up with something good. The tools were big hits, in fact, and we sent them to Forence, who put them on the market. This was, in fact, the only thing keeping the crazed businessman from losing it after the tragedy at the treasury.

Otherwise, it had been relatively smooth sailing. Most of our problems had been at the start, and we hadn’t hit any snags lately. But that complacency was about to come back to bite us...big time.

*

It happened three months later, just before the school was completed. An explosion, like an enormous firework going off, rocked all of Yenice. In the direction of the blast, black smoke billowed, and flames licked the sky.

“Isn’t that where the medical district is? Lionel, Ketty, come with me!” I ordered. “Dhoran and Pola, stay here and take whatever action you need. Kefin, the guild could be next. Prepare for the worst, and stay on guard.”

I dashed outside without waiting for a reply. The medical district was

supposed to be a joint effort between the Doctor's and Healer's Guilds. It was an ambitious project, meant to give everyone a place of comfort from whatever ailed them, and as such, it saw a lot of people coming and going to ensure its completion, halflings and full beastfolk alike. In short, there could have been a *lot* of casualties. The smoke alone would cause widespread injury, as if the flames weren't enough. Respiratory failure or even death were very possible, as I recalled from my past life.

I was the only one who could save them, and that drove me forward. I pushed through the mobs crowding the streets.

"Out of the way! Out of the way, I said! You're obstructing a healer!"

The people finally parted at my shouting. Lionel took the front, Ketty the rear, as always. I realized that I was sort of losing my cool, so I took a deep breath as we ran, until we came across the victims strewn across the street by the blast, covered in horrible burns.

"Tell me where the injured are!" I shouted at the crowd. "*High Heal!*"

The victims' cuts closed, their charred skin smoothed over. There should have been, at minimum, thirty-seven halflings working here, but not a single one of those lives was expendable. I was going to save every last one.

Cries calling out the location of yet more wounded started sounding fast. I raced around to every single one, reviving even those singed completely black as if they had been utterly carbonized. My return to form—that is, now that I was envisioning the spells properly once again—meant that their potency had increased all the more. I felt my eyes burn, not from the smoke but with emotion. There were still people who needed me, though. There would be time for feelings later.

Once everyone on the street had been seen to, I steeled myself to step into the source of the blaze itself. There were people inside.

I can do this... We have a chance...

"Lionel, Ketty, we're going."

They followed without hesitation. The moment we stepped inside, I focused magic into my bracelet and activated the wind barrier.

“I’m sorry for being reckless, guys. Ketty, you’ve been here before, right?”

“I’m surprised you remember,” she replied. “It’s five stories, but the fourth and fifth floors are still empty. Only the first three are finished. Oh, and there’s a basement.”

Then that could only mean...

“We’ll start at the top,” I declared. After a confused yowl from Ketty and a questioning look from Lionel, I explained, “Smoke moves upward. The people up there are in the most danger. I need you to lead the way.”

She didn’t argue, and up we went. I immediately recoiled upon looking overhead.

“The blast blew the ceiling clean off!”

“There’re people over here!” Ketty yelled, pulling me back.

I dashed over. There were three figures huddled together on the spacious floor. I swiftly cast High Heal on them, regenerating their skin, but they remained unconscious.

I hesitated. “What do we do? Carry them?”

Lionel approached. “No need.” He reeled back, then delivered three quick, decisive slaps, snapping the workers back to their senses, albeit rather violently.

“You’ve all been healed. Head for the first floor. Fast,” I said firmly. “Can you make it?”

The sight of Lionel and his massive greatsword had paralyzed them, but they responded to me with a quick nod.

The fifth and fourth floors hadn’t been divided by partitions or walls yet, which was a mercy in our current situation. It made spotting victims easy. There were five more on the fourth floor.

“You two doing okay?” I asked.

“As long as we’re not sucking in smoke,” Ketty said. “Feeling fine.”

“The source of the explosion must be the basement,” Lionel suggested.

“Probably,” I agreed. “But this is a disaster. How is everything burning so

quickly?”

Ketty shrugged. “Some shoddy work, eh? That’s what happens when work gets done fast.”

“Fire-retardant measures don’t seem to have been taken,” Lionel observed.

“Why didn’t they say anything to me? I would’ve helped!” I said.

“Likely to avoid being more in your debt than they already are.”

We never stopped moving. A man on the third floor lay crushed beneath stone, and we rescued him with the help of Lionel’s strength. I restored his mangled arm to form with Extra Heal.

As long as someone was still hanging on, I could heal them. I could do it. Lionel could handle the heavy lifting, and Ketty could sense people like a radar. I was reassured to have them by my side. And on we went, locating the survivors all the way down to the first floor.

The supports creaked, and the flames had burned through several load-bearing pillars, sending chunks of the ceiling raining down on us, but Lionel sliced apart anything that the wind barrier couldn’t handle.

“We still haven’t found Dolstar or his people,” I said. “And the smoke coming from the basement is a different color for some reason. I thought they hadn’t brought the Doctor’s Guild’s herbs over yet.”

“As far as I know,” Ketty answered.

“That can’t be the source of all this.”

Lionel cut down the door to the basement, and when the stairs became visible through the smoke, we descended. I could only imagine how poorly we would have been able to see without the wind barrier, or how bad it would have smelled. I cast Purification to clear up some of the fumes, revealing the floor below, including Dolstar, his men, and Guildmaster Smick.

“Area High Heal! Recover! Recover! Recover! Recover! All right, let’s carry them out.”

The moment those words left my lips, another blast rumbled the walls, blocking our only exit with fallen debris.

“Aaand, we’re trapped. I should’ve expected this. Let’s do something about the fire.”

My companions agreed. I lamented having forgotten that life was never fair as I did away with the soot and dust with cleansing magic and my companions extinguished the flames. We were breathing easily enough, so despite how intense the fire had been, we weren’t that badly off, all things considered.

“Can you cut through the ceiling, Lionel?”

“Surely, but it would be suicide without knowing what’s above us.”

“Have anything, Ketty?”

“Y’know, I’m surprised you’re not more panicked.”

Make no mistake, I was quite dismayed. It was just all on the inside. Everyone looked at me strangely.

“I guess because we’re underground. We’re relatively safe until Dhoran and Pola come to dig us out with the golem. Or if not that, we can stuff the debris into the magic bag and make it out that way.”

Lionel raised an eyebrow. “You anticipated this?”

“No, not exactly. But I’ve been thinking about our options since we got down here. If we marched out of here after rescuing everyone, I’d be a hero all over again. And that would provide the security for all this to last after I’m gone. But that’s what worries me.”

“True. Now would be the time for the enemy to act.”

“So I was thinking the safest thing to do would be to escape quietly, then catch them red-handed.”

“Wow, you’re nasty,” Ketty said, eyeing me in shock.

“That’s awfully bold, even for you, sir,” Lionel added.

“Chief, there are healthier ways of dealing with stress, y’know?”

How long would I have to endure this bullying? I wasn’t going to cry about it or anything, but my eyes might have sweat a little. These people didn’t understand my pain.

So I summarized it like so: “Yeah, like chugging a whole friggin’ barrel of Substance X. Come on, let’s have some tea.”

I produced a kettle and prepared to wait for our four survivors to wake up.

*

We were enjoying a rather pleasant chat over tea, when at last, the men of honor decided to join us.

“What?” Dolstar croaked. “Where am I? S-rank?”

“Ah, welcome to the land of the living. Good thing I made it in time, eh?”

He shot up. “The others!”

“They’re all safe. Trapped underground, but no one’s life is in immediate danger.”

“Oh...well. Good then.”

He began waking his men and made his way over to Smick.

“Whazzaaat? Who’s theeere?” the guildmaster slurred in a half-asleep stupor.

“Have a nice nap? We’re in the medical district’s central office.”

“Huh? Why are you here?”

No drawling this time, it seemed. Someone was wide awake.

“I heard an explosion go off, so I ran here to rescue people.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing? I was expecting a ‘thank you’ or two, but what do you have to be sorry for?” He didn’t respond. I turned to Dolstar. “Do you know what’s going on? What are you all doing down here, anyway?”

The twinblood glanced at Smick, then back at me. “We saw and smelled a strange smoke coming from downstairs, so we went to investigate.”

“But this isn’t where the explosion happened, is it?”

“No. The only thing the smoke caused was panic. And drowsiness.”

Then the fire we’d put out earlier had come from the floor above.

“You fell asleep? How? We could hear the blast from across town, and it blew the floor out of every story, straight through to the ceiling.”

“What?!”

“You didn’t hear it?”

“Only screaming, but I might recall...a faint detonation. But only vaguely.”

Sheesh, how strong had those fumes been?

“What do you know, Smick?”

The tanukin hesitated. “Walabis was here.”

“Walabis? Oh, your nephew. Right.”

He was supposed to be the tanukins’ head, but I’d straight up forgotten him entirely.

“He said he’d heard I was bringing herbs and stuff over to the new office, so he came to help.”

“I don’t like where this is going.”

“Something...strange happened. Things that shouldn’t during synthesis. The powders got all mixed together and...”

“But none of your materials could’ve caused the explosion, right? You wouldn’t have brought anything *that* dangerous...right?”

Smick broke into a sweat and looked away. “Wh-When the smoke started, I ran to get the firegrasses out of the room, but they were gone. Along with all sorts of other things. Someone had taken them while I was compounding.”

“But that wouldn’t make an explosion like this. *Right?*”

“Well, no. They don’t explode. They, er...combust when in contact with air. Into fireballs.”

Well, we’d found the cause of the fire. Could the smoke have turned it into that enormous blast? Or was it a dust explosion? No, the air was too clear for that.

“I have no idea what caused this,” Smick went on. “Walabis was nowhere to

be seen, as far as I know.”

No good was going to come of constantly grilling him. But I *was* going to give him hell later over starting the smoke.

“Anything else weird happen?”

“There have been a lot of people going in and out. Lots of different races, but I’m not really involved in their work.”

“Right.” If only this were a TV drama. Then maybe one of us could’ve flipped the script and identified the criminal by now. “Do you need everything here?”

“Yes, but we do have spares at the guild.”

“Are you sure? I can take it all with us.”

“Oh, yes, absolutely. Please and thank you.”

The guildmaster bowed repeatedly as I gathered together the various plants and bottles.

“So, when do we get outta here, S-rank?”

“Whenever we want. Why? Do you want out, Dolstar?”

“I’m not about to let someone pin this thing on us.”

Oh, right. I’d forgotten about the halflings.

“I suppose it’s been long enough. All right, let’s go.”

I started tossing the charred lumber and debris into the magic bag while Lionel protected us from the shifting pile with his shield. The cheers of amazement behind us were somewhat distracting, though, to be honest.

With the staircase visible once more, we ascended, collecting what scraps of material we could along the way. At the top, the doorway that Lionel had sliced apart was blocked by yet more debris.

“Man, I’m glad we brought the magic bag.”

I got back to work. Some of the rubble was still smoldering and giving off smoke. It was suspicious how easily everything had burned. This was going to

need investigating for sure.

Another hour later, we finally escaped the building.

“Crowd’s thinned a lot.”

“The stragglers seem to have been worried,” Lionel observed.

Only a few people remained on the streets.

“Where to?” Ketty asked.

“I think the giant golem’s probably a good place to start.” The golem in question was causing a stir over at the site of the schoolhouse. “Whoever set all this up, I’m gonna wring their neck. Dolstar, where would the halflings be?”

“In front of the government offices, I’d assume.”

“Head there. Find out what you can.”

Dolstar huffed. “Don’t make me regret trusting you.”

“I won’t. Lionel, Ketty, we’ve got work to do.”

13 — Heroes of the Eleventh Hour

We sprinted to the schoolhouse, where we found dog-and cat-folk, as well as some dragonewts.

I brandished the Illusion Staff and approached them. “What’s going on here?”

I didn’t need to be an oracle to tell they’d been fighting. Pola stood with her golem, Dhoran with his hammer, and Yulbo’s men, scratched and bruised, were the only things between them and the beastfolk.

“Do not make me repeat myself! *What* is going on here?!”

The dragonewts immediately fell to the ground. “Our humblest apologies, Lu — Mister Luciel. It was an emergency executive order by the council.”

“I didn’t know the dragonewts made excuses.”

None of the thirty-something dragonewts said a word, burying their heads in the dirt. I stepped towards the cat-and dog-folk and they shied back. I passed right by them, straight to Dhoran and the others, and healed them.

“Come on, we’ve barely been gone for two hours.”

“Bastards came in yellin’ you died and that the halflings blew the whole damn medical district up,” the dwarf said. “Tried to confiscate the school.”

“Oh, is that so? That sounds like a declaration of war against the Church if I’ve ever heard one.”

A chill ran through the mob. Lionel lit up his greatsword with flame, and everyone dropped their weapons at once. “If it’s a bloodbath you want, we would be happy to oblige,” he snarled.

Dog-and cat-folk alike all but turned to stone.

“Y-You! You’re cat-folk, ain’tcha? Throw us a bone over he—”

There was a *fwip* and then Ketty appeared behind the man, striking the back of his neck with incredible speed. Or at least that was what I *assumed* happened.



“You disgust me,” she spat. “I’ve got all your sorry faces memorized, so I suggest you think real hard about what your next move is. I recommend helping the chief, if you know what’s good for you, and the halflings as well.”

The beastfolk exchanged glances, then retrieved their weapons and made for the representatives’ estate, save for the dragonewts, who continued to grovel.

“Mister Luciel, we beg you, give us a chance to make this right.”

“Find me the arsonist, the merchant who sold you the lumber, and the ringleader behind this,” I demanded.

“At once!”

The dragonewts pulled themselves together and left in an organized manner.

“I’m proud of you guys for protecting this place. Let’s stop by the halflings’ street on our way back to the guild.”

“Sir.”

As we headed for our destination, we soon saw the mob. The Yenitians had exploded into a full-on lynching, jealous of the halflings’ new homes, and were about to set them ablaze. Ketty immediately took the lead in dispersing the rioters. I, meanwhile, did what healers do best.

“Search the houses!” I shouted.

I continued down the street, surveying the area carefully. My eyes fell on a child. There was no visible life in the little body, but I had to try. I cast my ultimate spell, secrecy and rules be damned.

“Extra Heal!”

The magical, rejuvenating light left my hands, reached the child...and sank in. Their body glowed, returning to normal as lacerations began to close.

“Beastfolk are so strong,” I muttered, tears for that single, small life welling up in my eyes. Lionel pretended not to notice.

Further inspection revealed that the child had likely been left as an example. A warning. We had places to be, so I left someone behind and told them to bring the kid to the guild later. Then we continued on.

“The blood means there must have been a fight,” I said. “This might be the worst case scenario.”

“What will you do?” Lionel asked.

“Find out who did this and make them pay. And the ones who were complicit won’t get off easy either.”

When the Healer’s Guild came into view, we saw its barrier first. Inside was a large group of beastpeople. The rabbit-, wolf-, fox-, and bird-folk outside didn’t look like they’d been invited. In front of them, protecting the barrier were transformed ursans with vespians perched on their shoulders, along with the knights of the Order of Healing.

Upon noticing me, the bird-folk descended from the skies. The ursans and vespians spotted us next, and a cheer broke out. The bird-folk, surprisingly, didn’t seem to be our enemy. Ursan pheromones, perhaps.

“So,” I called out, “does anyone care to tell me what all of you are doing at our guild? Well, Liliard? Orga? Forence?” The aggressors, including the three I’d named, froze. “I asked you all a question. Should I repeat it?”

“You’re alive,” Orga gasped.

“We...” Forence’s usual collected demeanor was nowhere to be seen. “I...”

“The council’s word is final,” Liliard stated. “The halflings you seem to prioritize above other earnest Yenitians have led to damages in the medical district. And you, as the spearhead of the entire endeavor, are to be held responsible.”

That sounded like a load of bull to me.

“That was an awfully quick meeting. The flames only started two hours ago. I personally find that curious. Unless... Oh, I see now. You *tricked* me. You took me and my guild for complete fools!” I gave a hearty yet empty and monotonous chuckle.

“You smuggled vespians into the city,” Forence countered. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Do I need the council’s express permission to invite guests into my own

home? They haven't taken so much as a single step outside the guildhall or burdened the city in the least."

"Don't play dumb! Their honey could be lining your pockets as we speak!"

"And? The vespians are not my slaves. They're my friends, and their cooperation is entirely voluntary. Plus, this is *my* property, and you signed a contract giving me financial liberty. You're a merchant yourself, so surely you don't need me to explain that."

The fox-man bit his tongue.

"Representative Liliard," I continued, "you were found guilty of embezzling the wages of hard-working citizens to fill your own purse, and now you're shifting the blame for what happened in the medical district. I'm frankly astonished beyond words. You're nothing like the rabbit-folk I know. You're lost."

"You're talking nonsense! And the medical district was never properly organized from the start! It only ever began because the people lost their minds over the dragon slaying business!"

"I assume you speak for all your people?"

The rabbit-folk around Liliard stepped back. They held hoes and kitchen knives for weapons. The scared civilians started to shout.

"I-I ain't lookin' to die!"

"I'm only here because they told me to be."

"Liliard, have you been lying?"

"Don't hurt me!"

Their pleas might have meant something to me had I not seen that eviscerated child on the side of the road on my way here. Too bad.

"Cry all you want," I snapped. "What I'm getting here is that you stand alone, Liliard. Still, the rest of you aren't guiltless. You assisted him, and so help me, by my power as Yenice's representative and an S-rank healer, you will be punished."

The crowd sank.

“Orga. I thought you, of all people, would have my back. I thought we shared the same goal. You were so excited about the school for Sheila. But this? What is this? Is this what the proud wolf-people have been reduced to?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I had to do this. For my people.”

“Would your daughter be happy to see you like this?” He said nothing. “So, what? Are we enemies now?” I didn’t want to believe that Orga was a bad person.

He passed his sword to his opposite hand, closed his eyes, and clenched his teeth. “It’s over—”

“C’mon now, give the poor guy a break, Luciel. You’ll make ’im go bald.”

Orga gasped.

“He’s right. No one likes a bully. But at least we have our conspirators now.”

“You really gotta handle this sorta thing with a bit o’ finesse. Else you’ll go makin’ enemies.”

“I am relieved to see he’s still as straight as an arrow, though.”

The two wolf-men grinned.

Someone pinch me, because I have to be dreaming. “What are you guys doing here?!” But I knew this was no dream. My friends were here.



“Home sweet home,” Gulgar smiled. “Heard you were raisin’ hell, so we couldn’t help but take a look. And we figured you could use a hand on the ass-whoopin’ side o’ things.”

“Orga wrote to us and said things were nearing a tipping point. And who do we find but the Lion of War and the murderous shadow assassin, the Nightgleam, with you.”

Lionel and Ketty. The latter being an assassin came as a bit of a surprise, though.

I gestured to my companions. “I found them being sold as slaves, but they’re my trusted partners now.”

Gulgar and Galba grinned. I could’ve sworn I heard a few snickers behind me too.

“Fine with me,” Gulgar said. “Orga, those fox-folk with us? What about the bird-folk?”

“What took you so long?!” he shouted back. “Can you imagine how sad Sheila would’ve been if I’d actually followed through just then?! Oh, I should know better. You were probably investigating the one behind all this, weren’t you?”

“Well reasoned, my friend,” Galba said. “We’ve finished our business. Your answer, please?”

“Forence, the fox-man, is just heated about the vespians. I think he’s on our side. The bird-folk switched sides as soon as they saw the ursans.”

“Good. The halflings should be in place, so let’s not keep them waiting. Luciel, thank you for trying to make our home a better place.”

“Oh, but why—”

“Beastfolk are a tricky bunch,” Galba interrupted, his tone soft but his eyes sharp. “Their leaders need to be firm and disciplinary or they won’t respect you. I’ll show you how it’s done. Now let’s get to the assembly hall.”

I could only nod. His gaze was foreign, not the Galba I knew.

Gulgar grabbed my shoulder. “Say, Luciel, I heard you borrowed the whole

Substance X dispenser from the Adventurer's Guild. That right?"

"Uh, yeah? Do you need some?"

"Oh yeah. A ton. Got a few new recipes and a lotta people to test 'em out on."

"Are you planning a kitchen nightmare?"

"Don't call it that! This one's actually edible! Bet they won't even pass out."

That just sounded worse, honestly. But I chose not to press the issue.

"That's progress! Do, uh, *all* your test subjects pass out?"

"You're the only one who doesn't. Anyway, let's get goin'."

"One second. Yulbo, you guys stay on standby here. Honeur, Bryan, are any of you hurt?"

"All fine here, Sir Sage," Honeur answered.

"We're okay as well," Bryan confirmed.

The battle must not have actually started by the time we'd arrived. The rest of us left for the assembly hall (formerly known as "the representatives' estate") with the wolf brothers.

How ignorant I'd been of the real power those two held in Yenice.

*

"Head on without me. I'll be back soon," Galba said as we arrived. Then he vanished.

"Poof goes the Recluse," Ketty joked. She seemed pretty impressed.

I returned my attention to my conversation with Gulgar. He was just as massive and bear-like as I remembered. He peered down at me with great interest.

"So, you're friends with the vespians now, huh? Honey's rare, y'know. Real rare. I wondered 'how in the hell' when I got the stuff you sent me. Those aren't folks you come across every day."

"It was pure coincidence, really. I'd hoped it might help make Yenice a better

place, but as you can see..." I slouched. "I haven't exactly had much success."

"Didn't think you would. Place is rotten to the core. Galba ever tell you why he left?"

"No. All I know is that they used to call him a prodigy."

"He was never part of the council, but they expected a lot outta him. Made him do things, then blamed him when something didn't work out. Every day was rough. So when I joined the Adventurer's Guild, the two of us left 'n never looked back."

"Even Galba gave up on this place?" The government hadn't changed its ways since then, that was for sure.

"And now our mistakes are comin' back to bite *you*. Galba couldn't take it. It was drivin' him crazy."

"It's...certainly made me appreciate how difficult being a leader is. Lately, it seems like all I can think about is when I get to leave."

In my past life, at the company I'd worked for, my job had been as simple as signing contracts, filling out purchase orders, and telling the specialists what needed doing. And then they'd do it. But that wasn't my reality anymore. I had to have a hand in everything, like a magical middle manager. All the pressure was on me, and it was crushing.

"When you cleared out that labyrinth and became a dragonslayer, they tried to brush it all under the rug. Turn a new leaf, pretend like the system ain't fallin' apart. But it wasn't the council you know that's responsible. It was the grand elders. You got caught like a rat, right in the middle o' their plans."

"Grand elders? What?"

Also, who? That was the first I'd heard of such a position. And hadn't Goldhus been the one who'd spread the rumors about me slaying the dragon?

Gulgar could see the confusion on my face. "Ever notice how all the representatives are young? Forty's about as old as they get. That's 'cause the *real* council callin' the shots is the *elder* council. A bunch o' old, out-of-touch beastfolk."

“I’ve never even heard of them.”

“Every race has got a representative. And every representative’s chosen by the elders. They’re not the sorta people the council can stand up to.”

“Why not?”

“The council’s only eight people, for one. For another, the dragonewt elder’s got the blessing, from what I hear. So those guys are stuck.”

There was still so much about Yenice that I was in the dark about. More than I had ever imagined.

“And here I thought things were going well these past few months,” I sighed.

Gulgar gripped my shoulder and lowered his voice to a pleasant rumble. “The elders didn’t like what you were doin’ with the slums, treatin’ the halflings like equals and givin’ ’em a place to be. That’s why they cooked this plan up.”

“That’s what caused the riot? That’s all?”

“You’ll pick up on the details later, but since you didn’t come outta the building after the fire, they took their chance to shove the blame onto the Healer’s Guild.”

“How did you figure all that out? How long have you guys been here?”

“Bout three days.”

“And you never got caught.”

“Galba’s good, eh?”

“So, what do I do once we get to the assembly hall?”

“Nothin’. You brought the winds of change to Yenice. You worked your ass off to make it better than ya found it. I think you’ve earned a little rest.”

Our conversation wound down as we approached our destination. The halflings were surrounded by a crowd of beastpeople, including tiger-folk. I started to run towards them, but Gulgar held me back.

“Relax. Take a look around. No one’s hurt, see? We got it covered with the Adventurer’s Guild.”

I took a closer look and noticed an armed group between the halflings and their aggressors, forming an impenetrable barricade. Goldhus and Jeiyas were among them.

“What’s going on?”

“Let’s get up close and see.”

We approached and found a gaggle of elderly beastfolk of every race, bound and gagged, along with a dozen or so others.

“Sorry it took so long,” Gulgar yelled to the crowd. The clamor died down at once. “Got Luciel here, not a scratch on ’im. Luciel, these guys are the ones I was tellin’ ya about.”

The old men emitted muffled cries, but the rest were silent.

“Mister Luciel, thanks for saving Dolstar. Your friends came at a good time. We’ve played our part.”

“Kefin?” I said in surprise. “Is anyone hurt?”

“Not one.”

I turned to Gulgar, but before I could ask him anything, Goldhus stepped in.

“I knew it’d take more than that to kill one of the dragons’ chosen!”

“I didn’t know what to think when they asked us to spread rumors that you’d died,” Jeiyas said, looking down at the wrinkled beastmen, “but there was no other way to get the elders to come out of hiding. It worked well.”

I couldn’t even begin to process what was happening. Thankfully, Gulgar simplified things for me. “It’s all part o’ the plan, and we had the adventurers in on it. It’s our last hope to make Yenice right again.”

“Then the attack at the school, and the slums, and the guild...”

“Some people got hurt, but it was the best option we had.”

“But a child almost died... You’re saying all that was a calculated loss? Was the fire part of that too?”

The purpose behind all this wasn’t lost on me. I knew why it’d had to be done. But I couldn’t accept that it had to be at the expense of others. Maybe that

made me naive.

“Hell no, you think we’re crazy? Scared us to death. Galba’s original plan was to meet with you before all this happened.”

I could find relief in that, at least. Our friendship might not have lasted otherwise.

“I’m back,” came a pleasantly smooth voice. “He was a tricky one. Almost got away from me!”

A tanukin hung over Galba’s shoulder. He carried a man in ropes under one arm as well. A strange calm washed over the area with his arrival.

“That guy on your shoulder,” I said. “Is that Walabis? And that other guy’s wearing the same clothes as one of the people I healed. Why is he human?”

Galba jerked the shoulder he held Walabis on. “He passed out the moment he saw me. So rude. What kind of greeting is that for an old friend? The *other one*, however, is the trickster behind the disaster at the medical district.”

“What?” How did he just so happen to know that?

“I think his face will be familiar to the halflings.”

Galba dropped Walabis to the floor, then lifted the other man’s head with his free hand.

“No,” Kefin gasped. “Hatori!”

It couldn’t be. The Hatori who was supposed to have died in the labyrinth?

“I thought you told me he was dead,” I said.

“He’s been one very busy corpse,” Galba answered. “And with the empire, of all places.”

“But doesn’t he have friends here? People he owes his life to?”

“Supposedly, but he’s capable of changing his appearance on a whim, and he’s been using that to gather intel on the slums and feed it to the elders.”

The man cackled. “Fools! I’m a ninja! Betrayal is the oldest trick in the book! My talents belong...belongeth to the highest bidder!”

Wherever this nutcase had gotten his impression of ninjas, I was certain it wasn't from a genuine history book. There was no question about it—he was one of the reincarnated.

"I'm glad to see you awake, but you may not be so glad to learn that you can't use your abilities anymore," Galba said. "Criminal slaves aren't allowed that privilege."

"Fool! You underes...timate...me? Where are, er, beith mine unbinding techniques?"

"Hatori." Dolstar stepped out of the crowd of halflings. "Why would you double-cross us?"

"You have mine gratitude for rescuing me, but I have a divine duty to fulfill. I was chosen."

"Divine duty? So what, Lady Crya descended and told you that personally, did she? You've lost your mind. Chosen for what, exactly?"

"When I lost my—mine life, God spoke unto me and pulled me from the darkness. T'would be an affront to said deity for their chosen to live in squalor for an eternity!"

He was so obviously one of the reincarnated that it almost hurt. But mad ramblings about gods and destiny aside, the more pressing matter was the attempted murder.

"Dolstar and tens of people were in that building," I said. "If I hadn't saved them, they would've all burned to death. That doesn't faze you in the slightest?"

Hatori glared at me. "The fault lies with *you*. With every imperial spy captured, my purse became lighter. What was I to do but accept what work I could?"

Galba looked down at him with cold eyes. "No intention of owning up to it, I see. Not a problem. We'll have plenty of time to talk later, and you'll tell me everything, one way or another. For now, though, I think you need a nap. Luciel, Substance X, please."

“Uh, okay. Sure. Here.”

I took out a cup and filled it with the liquid. I suspected one of the reincarnated, and a ninja at that, might be more resilient to this form of torture, but handed it over regardless. Galba ordered him to down the glass, and the guy didn't even make it all the way before foaming at the mouth. He went out like a light.

“Not even diluted.” Gulgar grimaced. “Damn, Luciel.”

I raised an eyebrow, but Galba's address was about to commence.

“Hello again, friends. And a pleasure to meet you, strangers. I am the son of Elder Grauga, who you'll find currently tied up over there,” he began. “I've always hated this country. I've seen the government's inner workings, sat in on council meetings with my father from a young age. And what I saw was a council in name only, and a court of fools in practice. There was no legislation. No betterment. Only sabotage and slander.”

He paused for a moment before continuing. “Failure is the fault of the one who proposes change; success is the object of false ownership. The council I saw was a failure, a broken heirloom of our grandfathers who made the sage their scapegoat and pointed their ire towards the Healer's Guild. The spices that populate our fields and fill our coffers, which the government so loves to claim credit for, came from this very sage.”

I was in awe of his persuasive delivery.

“Galba's proposed three things at the council before,” Gulgar said quietly. “Two were hits. The other one didn't turn out so good. The council—*elder* council, that is—beat it into the ground. Can ya believe that?”

“And the elder council is different, right?” I whispered back.

“Yup. They choose the representatives, like I said. Every two years.”

“I still can't believe I never knew.”

“Doesn't surprise me.”

Galba's speech went on.

“So why was Healer Luciel made a representative? To hide the wrongdoings

that the rest of the council have been conducting for so long. The late Representative Shahza plotted with ex-Vice Guildmaster Grohala to sell out their own country, accepting coin in exchange for state secrets—money that taints the elders who accepted bribes to allow him to join the council. Representative Liliard falsified reports, skimming wages and hiding his deeds behind the fervor over Luciel’s feats.”

He paused again. Then, “Mister Luciel was to end his term on the council with a whimper. Or so the representatives planned. But he breathed new life into the reeking slums. His fair treatment of the halflings, a people born into discrimination, has caused a dramatic decrease in halfling crime rates. He’s privately funded the founding of a school for the good of future Yenitians. And yet, today I’ve learned of a plot to undermine the medical district that he and the halflings tried so hard to build. Yenitians, I ask you, is this who we are? Do we repay kindness with spite? Are we a race of scoundrels and bandits? If the answer is no, then it’s time to rebuild this country!”

Galba’s efforts to undo years of twisted culture was admirable. And by the stirring in the crowd at his mention of the school, it seemed that project still wasn’t widely known about, which I found surprising.

“I’m not sure I like hearing Galba call me ‘mister,’” I whispered to Gulgar.

“Hey, it’s a speech.”

“I feel like he should just up and become a representative himself. Might be a good idea.”

“Maybe. For a bit.”

“Wait, what’s going on at the guild in Merratoni?”

“They’re gettin’ along fine. Brod’s the one who told us to come give ya a hand.”

“Master’s always looking out for me, huh?”

“Thank ’im in person when you’re done with all this.”

“I should.”

Not that I could ever express my gratitude enough.

“He cares about you a great deal,” Lionel said.

“Yeah. He’s always there to help, always has been. Ever since I first came to Merratoni. I’d feel the same about you if you’d actually stop being a slave.”

The older man guffawed. “I’m comfortable where I am, thank you.”

“Just think about it. Please.”

He only smiled back. Meanwhile, Galba’s oration was reaching its climax.

“Normally, I would not have the authority to judge these men for their actions. And that’s why I’m hereby assuming the role of wolf-folk leader and invoking the right of imposition.”

The crowd started to stir. Assuming the role of leader? The right of imposition? I was lost.

“Can Galba just declare that?” I asked Gulgar. “And what’s the right of imposition?”

Gulgar thought for a moment. “Well, when any leader or elder dies, or commits a crime that’d get ‘em enslaved, their race gets together and picks someone new to assume the role.”

“And no one would dare oppose Galba, so he can pretty much do it automatically.”

The wolf-man smirked. “No one with a brain, at least. Now the right o’ imposition...”

According to Gulgar’s explanation, this particular political tool was risky. Invoking it meant that any representative for the next ten years would no longer have the right to speak during meetings. Plus, unless the rest of the council was softened up first, the City of Freedom wasn’t going to be willing to give such a right away. The chances of it being vetoed were extremely high.

“Will Galba’s motion pass, do you think?”

He smirked even wider. “All the elders’re criminals. Right now, Galba’s the only one with any authority left. And the right o’ imposition resets when a new rep gets chosen. The plan’s airtight.”

I looked back at Galba, who had begun issuing his decrees.

“Well, I’m off,” Gulgar said. “Got some dishes to make. Gimme some Substance X.”

I handed over a barrel, and he walked off towards his brother. The two of them together was an intimidating sight indeed.

“The elders are to be executed for the crimes they’ve committed today,” Galba declared, “and their personal assets are forfeit. The representatives cannot be dismissed without the risk of crashing the economy, so there will be a grace period for establishing new officials. Upon the results of an investigation, innocent representatives will be spared enslavement, but their assets will be repossessed. The guilty will serve a life sentence as, of course, slaves. The fate of the one responsible for the fire will be decided by a spokesperson for the former slums after a thorough interrogation. Walabis may have only been his puppet, but he too will be enslaved. As for the rioters, were I making the decision myself, you would all become criminal slaves as well. But Mister Luciel is merciful. You will be pardoned after a meal of Gulgar’s creation and a drink of the sage’s ‘elixir.’ The choice is yours, and it’s offered to everyone equally. Come and let’s rejoice in honor of a new Yenice with a bracing feast and a mugful that leaves an aftertaste unlike any other!”

Gulgar howled in sheer excitement and joy, but I couldn’t help but wonder if Galba was being too harsh. Or was this the lenient approach? Was my unwillingness to deliver punishment just a manifestation of my fear of being hated? How I wished for the existence of courts, a penal system, something... But then I realized that I was running away again. I was afraid of getting my hands dirty.

Cries, cheerful and sorrowful alike, filled the air around me. Some were vitriolic jeers towards Galba for closing the chapter with a bloody execution. They flung awful words like “patricide” at him, but he didn’t flinch. He was going to kill his father, and that was that.

I offered a stipulation. “Can we decide the executions at a later date?”

Galba looked taken aback for a moment, then nodded.

I turned to the elders. “The crimes you’ve all committed must be punished. I

would take this time to make your peace and atone before your souls leave this world and your bodies become nourishment for its soil.”

I said nothing more on the matter.

“The criminals and their accomplices are to be enslaved until a date is set for their punishment,” Galba concluded.

I watched the adventurers pull away the elders, the leaders, whoever they were, by the ropes binding them and prayed that this would bring some sense of normalcy back to the city. I had been made a fool of, led along on a string through a twisted country that I thought I had understood, blinding myself with only what was in front of me. And the realization of how much peril I had actually been in terrified me.

14 — Parting Ways

After Galba's coup, the wolf brothers urged me to return to the Healer's Guild, but I chose to stay with them. I felt that I needed to see things through to the end.

"It's not going to be fun, I assure you," Galba insisted, taking out a list of Yenitian citizens, organized by race. He reeled off a list of the offenders to Gulgar, and the reckoning of Substance X began. But there were too many to cook for at the moment, so that idea was shelved for the time being.

While Gulgar officiated the consumption of Substance X, Galba explained the right of imposition to me in greater detail.

"...so the wolf-people won't be worse off because of it. The right will reset once new leaders are chosen."

"But the other beast races could theoretically use it to gang up on one race, couldn't they?"

"Technically, yes, but it requires a majority. In this case, we needed to gather all of the elders and prove them guilty, because criminals lose their voice in the matter."

"You thought this all through. So when the explosion happened, you tried to use it to rout them out. To wipe Yenice's slate clean all at once."

"That's right. Thank goodness we and the dragonewt guildmasters go back. We only just spoke to them yesterday. This was supposed to go a lot smoother and happen about a month later."

"Huh. Even you make mistakes."

He chuckled. "More than you know."

It was a messy, steamroller of a judgment, brought down by a single fist taking advantage of the situation. But the rioters couldn't complain. A single mug of Substance X was all that stood between them and freedom. They took it gladly...and then passed out, of course.

37 dragonewts, 217 dog-folk, 163 cat-folk, 211 rabbit-folk, and 349 tiger-folk was the substance casualty count. Only a handful of fox-folk were convicted and none of the bird-folk. Several wolf-folk also drank Substance X, while the ones who had attacked the Healer's Guild (including Orga) were made slaves for their crimes. The dog-, cat-, rabbit-, and tiger-people representatives, along with their subordinates, were to relinquish their positions and be similarly enslaved, to be transferred to Grandol, the Land of Labyrinths. My morbid guess was that they would be used as meatshields for the dungeons.

Representative Jhak and his office hadn't participated in the riots and had even tried to stop their people from joining them, yet still, it wasn't enough. They too were made criminal slaves and left in Goldhus's custody.

"You're sure about this?" I asked Orga. All he'd been was a man with good intentions and a genuine love for his country.

"Of course not," he replied. "But I have to become a slave. It would set a bad example if I didn't own up to my mistakes."

He must have resented himself after the incident with Shahza, for not stopping him when he'd had the chance.

"But what about Sheila?"

"I've made arrangements with Galba and Gulgar. It hurts. It does. But it's what I have to do to make amends."

He downed his mug and promptly passed out.

I looked at him and muttered, "It hurts me too. Seeing people I know suffer these consequences."

"It always does." Galba patted my shoulder. "But there's a difference between kindness and indulgence, and it's up to leaders to understand that and shoulder the burden. That goes for you too, Luciel."

Then he shouted instructions to the adventurers and left with the criminals for the nearest slaver.

Yenice was starting to change.

New representatives were chosen from a variety of candidates, both self-

nominated and put forth by others, and subsequently elected. The new council members swore under contract to lead honestly and hold themselves to the same laws they protected. Their two-year terms would begin once the procedures for taking over office were settled. Bryan was among these new representatives.

The officials had plans for preventing another political disaster from happening in the future. Checks and balances were to be put in place, and there were even plans to invite the exiled beast races back to the country and build a whole new place for them. Personally, I was far more interested in all that than the trouble on my side of the fence.

*

Eight months into my term, the school I had envisioned from day one was finally about to see fruition. Dhoran huffed as he erected a memorial at the entrance, commemorating its opening. Pola assisted nearby.

“Hardening... Done,” she said.

And the construction was complete.

“Great work! All of you!” I raised my fist in the air. “The school is hereby finished!”

A cheer broke out not only from the dwarves but from the people who’d been eagerly awaiting this day for so long. The street was filled with excitement.

The days that followed “the incident” had been anything but easygoing. For one, our honey-making pros beneath the guildhall had been outed to the whole city, and its people were clamoring over Yenice’s new source of revenue. But a statement from the vespians’ leader hushed them right up.

“We are making honey for our savior, Sir Luciel,” Honeur had told them. “Our contract places us under *his* employ—no one else’s. If anyone expects us to be providing for Yenice, we will take our business elsewhere.”

“Noooo!” Bryan cried, exploding into his enlarged state. “Anyone who wants to give the vespians trouble has gotta go through me! Come on, I’ll take on every last one of you!”

With the bird-folk's backing as well, everyone's hopes were shot down pretty quick. The fox-people were rather reluctant, but resigned themselves to finding new sources of income on their own.

The road here hadn't been simple, but although somewhat delayed, the school was done at last. Parents wasted no time submitting requests to have their children attend, and the first class was looking to already exceed three hundred students. But considering how few people had been aware of its existence at Galba's speech, we could probably expect that to swell to *sixteen* hundred before long. The plan was to start with a curriculum of general education, and those who passed could move on to specialized areas of their choosing from there. Two days per lesson, the third day off, then another two days in a new subject. Hopefully that way we could accommodate everyone's styles and speeds of learning.

I had been thinking that reading, writing, and arithmetic would be a good place to start. We could begin with teaching them how to write their names, then the names of their families, then common words, until everyone could write their own letters. For arithmetic, the four basic operations would be plenty.

From there, we could have lessons in medicine from the Doctor's Guild or healing magic from the Healer's Guild for students with holy magic affinities, which Jord had graciously agreed to supervise. I had considered teaching other affinities for combat purposes, but that was a wide field that I felt unprepared to handle. The sky was the limit in terms of what could be taught as long as Yenice continued to seek out new possibilities. There could even be combat lessons or recreational activities outside the classroom, but I figured I'd leave that to the headmistress to decide.

"Now there're just the students and their interviews to finish," I said. "I have full confidence you'll do great, Headmistress Nalia."

"Thank you, Mister Luciel."

I smiled. "Let's nix the 'mister.' You're not a slave anymore."

"I believe it was *you* who relieved me of that duty and bequeathed me with one that I'm wholly undeserving of."

“That’s not true. No one else is as smart and gifted at teaching as you are. You’re perfect for the job.”

“Well, that’s just absurd.”

“Seriously, don’t be so humble. And Jord can use Dispel now, so when the slaves you were instructing are fit enough for the job, you can speak with him and hire them if they don’t end up working at the guild.”

“Understood.”

“Good luck, Headmistress. Yenice’s educators and pupils are in your hands.”

“Sir Lionel entrusted me with safeguarding your legacy, Mister Luciel. So that is what I’ll do.”

“Thank you.”

One month prior, I had summoned Nalia to the guildmaster’s office. Lionel and Ketty were with me.

“Nalia, I’m freeing you from enslavement.”

“What’s the meaning of this?” she asked.

I ignored her and continued. “I’ve heard tales of a general of the empire. An Illumasian without peer on the battlefield, who they call the Lion of War...otherwise known as Lionel Grust Elphens. One day, at a camp away from the battlefield, he was betrayed, poisoned, and crippled—the tendons in his legs severed—when a cat-woman named Kettia, more widely known as the Nightgleam, appeared just in time to save him. But the emperor considered the two guilty of treason, so they were punished accordingly.”

I paused for a moment and then went on. “This was only a pretense, though. An excuse to deal with a nosy general who’d been investigating human experiments taking place in the empire as well as rumors of the presence of demons. And meanwhile, while Lionel and Kettia had been made slaves for their crimes, there was a woman named Lunalia. Lunalia had been in the service of the Elphens house for years, and when she attempted to buy the two back, the slaver tricked her. Suddenly, she found herself in chains, in the same Yenice-

bound carriage as the people she'd tried to save."

Nalia looked at Lionel, then Ketty, and nodded silently.

"But what I want is you, the Nalia I know, to be the school's headmistress," I said. "I want you to teach people like you taught the slaves we took in."

"Lunalia served the Elphens house well," Lionel said gently. "But her time is over. *Nalia's* duty is to educate and to nurture. Do so, so that I might journey in peace, knowing that what Luciel has built is safe with you."

"Leave the boys to me," Ketty added. "I'll cover for ya."

Nalia was quiet for a moment. "It seems the decision's already been made."

"The plots don't stop with the emperor. Heaven knows how much of the imperial court could be implicated. Perhaps even the chancellor," Lionel said. "The threat of demons is imminent, and who can say how much of the spirit's portents are trickery. Should the worst come, we would feel assured knowing there are allies here."

Oh. Right. I'd forgotten about that whole spirit prophecy whatever. And hold up, what was that about demons? With the empire? Uh-huh, noted. Stay away from Illumasia. Will do.

"I understand." Nalia gazed into his eyes. "All I ask in return is that you come back to me safely."

Lionel gazed back. "I will."



Forbidden love. How moving. The emotion welling up between the two was palpable.

“Yeah, sorry to ruin the mood, but we’re still gonna be here for, like, several more months,” I interrupted.

The two of them stared at me blankly for a moment, then laughed awkwardly. It didn’t do much to hide their embarrassment.

The next day, I nullified Nalia’s slave pact in front of everyone, then she signed her contract, which officially made her headmistress.

“With this, Nalia is the first to take the step beyond slavery,” I declared. “She’ll be heading the school as her own woman. There will be more of these to come as I distribute jobs, and you’re free to speak to me directly any time you’d like to be freed on your own terms.”

As I ascended the stairs, I heard Nalia’s old students congratulate her. I looked back and saw their smiling faces.

“It’s been a whole month,” I muttered. “Looks like she’s found a new purpose.”

With Nalia at the school’s helm, everything else was starting to take shape. The vespians were producing honey at their usual rate, but at a premium quality that would sell to our new buyer for a hefty price. The ursans’ hard work in the fields was bearing fruit in the clothing and cloth they weaved from the cotton they harvested, with many prospective clients on the horizon according to Forence.

Speaking of which, he’d apparently gone nuts when he had seen the vespians during the riot just minutes before our arrival, and that was what had landed him in slavery. I felt bad for the guy, though, so I’d ended up buying him. He was way too shrewd of a merchant to ever get into any bad business, so I felt comfortable trusting him with managerial responsibilities. Currently, he was putting his all into his work for his wife with such passion that he refused when I said I would free him once he found a successor to take his place. So I ended up flat out ordering him to find one and set his pact to expire in ten years, to

renew again if he didn't have a substitute by then. And then he groveled on the ground. Why? I wish I knew.

As for Orga, Galba wound up buying him as well as taking in Sheila, to the ex-representative's tearful gratitude, and Gulgar took Walabis. The first two were supposedly busy investigating a few things, while Gulgar had already left for Merratoni, with a bit of pep in his step, I might add. He had much Substance X research to conduct with his new tanukin assistant, who left with decidedly little pep in his step on account of being unconscious.

I'd only heard things here and there about the elders' executions, but they were slowly being carried out. The remains were being taken care of by their respective races. Galba never let me anywhere near them.

"Your job is to heal," he'd said. "It's not something you should see. But I hope you'll still pray for their happiness in the next life. Assuming there is one."

Kefin had taken my place in the proceedings, on Galba's instruction, so if nothing else, I was at least certain that things were moving along.

"There's just the central healing office in the medical district, passing on the plans to attract adventurers to the new representatives, and my job's finally over," I said to myself. "One last push. We can do this."

Memories raced through my mind—reminders that complacency would only end up burning me.

Back when only a few days had passed since the arson in the medical district, the beastfolk were getting busy. Everyone knew what had happened, and they'd all wanted to see the district reach completion. Some time after construction of the schoolhouse resumed, Yenitians from all over the city had started volunteering to help clear the rubble.

The people had been given a lot to think about after the day of the incident. Specifically, how they could do their part to make Yenice a better place. And this was their answer. Thanks to them, by the time the school was finished, the ashes and debris had been cleared. The council was quick to request my assistance once again, with a new, generous budget from their freshly filled coffers.

Reconstruction of the medical district began immediately after the school's completion. With Dhoran at the helm, Verdel's team took the lead in helping to teach Dolstar's halflings, as well as many other beastfolk, about the process. Contracts were made with everyone involved, and several measures were taken to prevent a repeat of last time, but they all shared the same goal. The halflings worked as equals.

Meanwhile, after many trips to and from the forest and the quieted labyrinth for resources, the preparations for the school's opening were continuing.

"I've got plenty of spare parchment, but I'm glad you two finished in time," I said.

"Your ideas were incredible."

"Inspired!"

The rival artificer duo, Pola and Lycian, had successfully crafted the magic sheets and pens.

"You can write and rewrite as many times as you want with these," Pola remarked. "Perfect for learning."

"When literacy improves, we'll have a brand new generation of poetry admirers," Lycian added. "And dishonest merchants will find far fewer victims as understanding of mathematics grows."

"I can only hope so," I said. The two were practically inseparable, and they made a good pair. Living proof that birds of a feather do indeed flock together. "That about wraps up the work I need from you two. Now, we should talk about your intentions moving forward."

"I'm with grandpa."

"And I go where my rival goes," the elf stated. "However, I'm not at all opposed if you care to hire my services as a researcher. Similar to what you did for Nalia."

She'd been harping on that for a good while now.

"Talk with Dhoran about it. He's handling the hiring of specialists," I replied. "If he says no, I'd like to have you oversee the fields, which you'd be

compensated for, of course. And I wouldn't mind you pursuing magical research on the side."

"I see you can't be swayed."

But my obstinacy came out on top yet again. "You can't bear the responsibility for others' lives when you don't even have your own together, so I'm leaving the detailed stuff to people more qualified than me. I trust Dhoran fully to handle it."

"Trust?" Pola echoed.

"You both were a real headache at first, I'll admit," I laughed, reminiscing. "But your skills were never in question, and you've really gotten much more organized lately. So I can trust you guys with more responsibility now." Pola looked away, also remembering her past antics. "Anyway, for the time being, I want you to help Nalia and Dhoran with anything they need. After that, make a list of what you want to make, and I'll go through and approve stuff."

"Okay."

"We'll excuse ourselves."

The two happily trotted off.

"Which one of us is the stubborn one again?" I muttered with a dry smile.

That night, I called Dhoran to the guildmaster's office.

"You asked for me?"

"Yes. Please, take a seat."

He plopped down in the chair across from me, and our discussion began.

"How are things progressing with the central healing office in the medical district?"

"Just needa hammer it out with Jord 'n Smick and stock the place up with facilities and whatnot."

"That's good to hear. Once that's finished, my term here will be up. What are your plans after that?"

“Follow you, o’ course. What else?”

There wasn’t a shred of doubt in his eyes, which took me by surprise.

“You don’t want to go back home? Where other artisans like you are?”

He grunted. “Ya mean where I blew my forge to high heaven and they made me a debt slave? Ain’t got no home to go back to.”

“Really? I was actually hoping you might set up shop there and be my personal smith, but if you say so.” The dwarf bit his lip. “How would that sound? Being free? Being an S-rank healer’s research and development lead?”

Finally, he croaked, “Pretty damn spectacular.”

“Then do we have a deal? We might stop by Merratoni first, though.”

“Deal.”

“Appreciated. I’ll free you and Pola whenever you like. Just say the word.”

“Let’s save that for when we’re home, if ya don’t mind.”

“All right. Until then.”

“Until then.”

Dhoran left the room.

“He sure puts up a front,” I said to myself. “The graves of his family are there. He could stand to speak his mind more.”

His son and daughter-in-law had left for the mine one day but never returned. Rumors had spread that an explosion might have sealed their fate, and while rescue efforts had continued with little success, Dhoran and his granddaughter had been left alone.

I’d learned all this from my correspondence with Grand, the master blacksmith. Once he had heard about Dhoran’s presence, he had supposedly spruced up the dwarf’s forge all new, just for him. He and others had apparently tried to look for Dhoran and Pola after hearing about the accident but could never find him.

“Only Kefin left.”

I crossed my arms and thought as I returned to my private room. After some magic circle practice, I hit the hay.

I had already freed Milphene from slavehood some time earlier, and she was currently working in the honey business. She'd seemed oddly restless ever since Nalia's promotion to headmistress until one day, when I called her to my office, she spilled everything to me, including her mission regarding a certain Spiritsworn. The guilt had been too much for her to handle the secrecy.

"You treated me no differently despite how I wronged you," she'd said. "I simply couldn't keep it to myself any longer."

I didn't fully believe everything she had told me, but she was a hard worker and put her spirit magic to good use on the fields' plants. Plus, she got on well with the vespians, so I let her stay.

I remembered how she'd cried from sheer joy. "Thank you. The great spirit asked me to find its chosen mystic, but I could surely never see it through."

She wasn't a fighter and had taken very well to the honey farm and its delicious samples.

For Creia's part, her admiration for Nalia had driven her to try her hand at teaching. Nalia acknowledged her talents, and the decision was made. I freed her and replaced her slave pact with an employment contract. And another thing: it turned out that Creia was a strong admirer of Lord Reinstar and extremely skilled in archery and dual-wielding (when she wasn't completely flustered). From personal experience, I could say with confidence that she was stronger than me. My sore body from all her whoopings could attest to that. The fact that my stats were technically higher didn't mean squat.

That had been all the convincing I had needed to hire her. She'd helped me to understand what Brod had always taught me: that I had let a few level-ups trick me into thinking I was strong. I took on some extra training on the side after that. And I genuinely hoped she and Milphene found happiness in this city.

The next day, I met with Kefin. All of his men were staying in Yenice, except their leader, and remaining slaves, every last one.



“I’m going with you, sir. But my boys stay here.”

“I think you’d find a better life if you joined them.”

“Yeah, maybe. Things are changing around here. But my loyalty’s with you.”

His mind was made up.

“But what will they do without their leader?”

“That’s why I’m leaving them here. To protect your fields and school. And let’s face it, we’re criminals. You can’t free us without losing face.”

I couldn’t argue. I’d found myself with a *lot* of slaves over the last year.

“You know staying with me’s not going to be easy, right?”

“I know. So in five—no, ten years, when you’ve worked us to the bone, *then* you can free us. It’s what we want.”

They’d clearly put more thought into this than I had. As always. Yet again, I found myself acting naive, so I agreed to his proposal. But they wanted me to remain their owner, since I had such good rapport with the adventurers and they wouldn’t give them trouble. I later confirmed this with Goldhus, and I was right at the top of the top of their list of VIPs. So by extension, my slaves would be protected as well.

The Healer’s Guild and Doctor’s Guild collaboration project was complete. On the first floor of the office were the joint reception and healing rooms, the second floor was a library, and the third floor was the mess hall. From that floor up, only authorized personnel were allowed. Floor four consisted of the men’s living quarters, with the women’s housing on floor five. A workshop for synthesizing made up the basement, complete with actual ventilation this time. When they made me the official first director (for a whole single day), I learned for the first time that Jord evidently wasn’t a fan of the spotlight either.

I couldn’t believe how much time had flown. Here I was, finally at the opening ceremony of Yenice’s first school session.

“My name is Luciel, S-rank healer. On this fine, gorgeous day, I’m pleased to announce the start of Yenice’s new academy. As its founder, I’d like to express

my profound gratitude to everyone who made this a reality, and my heartfelt congratulations to its first students on their admission.”

I took a breath and went on. “It was discrimination that gave me the idea for this venture. The prejudices against halflings and between the other races. You see, we are not all born equal. But we are all born with the right to an education—to learn and expand our horizons—to become inventors, doctors, merchants, whatever we want to be. And that is an opportunity I hope to extend with the founding of this school. The things that will be learned in these halls will become Yenice’s future. That is my hope, and I have confidence it will come true. I’ve seen your willingness to better your home in your assistance with clearing the old medical district.”

“I’ve been in Yenice for about a year now,” I went on, “and to be honest, my memories of the city aren’t good. I was assaulted on my first day here, our first healing demonstration was met with obstruction, I found myself delving into a labyrinth, and the obstacles didn’t end when I joined the council. There were hurdles and corruption at every turn. And then there were the riots. But all the same, I truly hope this project brings joy. I genuinely believe this will be my first good memory of the city. Congratulations again to Yenice’s first class.”

That night, Nalia gave me an earful of leg-numbing proportions. That is, I sat on my heels for so long that I could no longer feel them by the end of the lecture. But we don’t need to talk about that.

I rode atop Forêt Noire the following morning, the sun still well below the horizon. Lionel straddled his steed to my side, and Kefin manned the carriage carrying Ketty, Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian. Together, we departed the City of Freedom, bound for the dwarves’ hometown.

The Lineage of the White Wolf — Grandol

Grandol, AKA the Land of Labyrinths, was considered the seat of the Adventurer's Guild. True to its name, dungeons dotted the land, teeming with ferocious creatures. It was a crossroad for all adventurers seeking glory or strength, green and veteran alike, earning the region its well-known pseudonym, the Land of Beginning and End.

It had been two years since A-rank party the Lineage of the White Wolf had arrived in the area with Sekiros's and Basura's wives, Melina and Mernell. And that was all the time they'd needed to make a name for themselves, but things weren't always smooth sailing for the five of them.

*

Bazan downed his pint and slammed it on the counter. "The hell were you doing? We woulda got 'im if you'd went in for the kill!"

Sekiros and Basura had nothing to say for themselves. Their night at the tavern after reporting back to the guild for their mission was filled with anything but cheer. Hunt after hunt, job after job, the party had only met with failure. At first, they'd written it off. Just a little slip-up. But the slip-ups kept happening, and they could no longer ignore the issue at hand. The one thing they were in sync about was that they needed to talk, so they had plodded their way to their favorite tavern to do just that.

"But it wasn't safe," Basura argued. "What if it countered us?"

"It wasn't *safe*?" the leader spat, glaring. "Since when do we give two shits about workplace safety? We made it this far by bein' ruthless, by havin' each other's backs."

Bazan had a feeling he knew what this was about. It was their new family—the ex-receptionists they'd married. The Lineage had always fought instinctually with the innate combat senses that most beastfolk had, but now that two of the trio had a reason to come home every day, their strategy had become inherently more defensive in nature.

This was never an issue in Merratoni, where they'd excelled in the field and

risen quickly to the prestigious A-rank, but the monsters in Grandol were different. The vicious beasts were cunning, and the cracks in the team were starting to show. They were hit once more with the fear of death. The smallest mistake in coordination could mean the difference between life and a gruesome end. While Bazan fought like they always had, purely offensively, Sekiros and Basura had unconsciously adopted more timid strategies, effectively shattering their time-tested collaboration and trademark decisiveness all at once.

Still, Bazan knew he couldn't snap at his friends and blame their marriages for their problems. Not only would it be wrong, it would only come off as the jealous ramblings of a man with a broken heart. It was agony.

He stared at the other two, who sat in silence, then said, "We'll need to rethink our strategy. Go home." And that was that.

He sighed as he watched his partymates leave for their families, feeling a twinge of sadness at the thought of returning to the lonely inn by himself. The team was in dire straits. It was obvious to everyone. But their long friendship had held them together through these trying times, and the thought of disbanding the party never crossed any of their minds.

Bazan agonized over how to make things the way they used to be—no, even better. Meanwhile, Sekiros and Basura, well aware of the source of their struggles, considered how they might mend the divide in their group.

One day, during a get-together orchestrated by Melina and Mernell, the wives had an idea for the trio.

"Why not try teaching new adventurers?"

"What? Wait, you know how rough things are right now. It's no time to be playing coach," Sekiros refuted as gently as he could. The other two men nodded in agreement.

"Well, yeah, we know what you guys are going through," Melina said.

"Then—"

"That's what it's for," Mernell interjected.

It was for them. Their current situation was precisely why instructing newbies, going back to their roots, was exactly what they needed to climb out of their rut. And with less experienced adventurers around, an element of defense would be necessary to their strategy, thereby balancing out their offense-heavy tactics from the past.

But the three weren't convinced, and it took much pressing from their wiser halves before the party acquiesced. From then on, the Lineage started to supplement their main diet of labyrinths and hunts with guiding new adventurers through dungeons and defense jobs. And wouldn't you know it, the results amazed them.

Through the shared goal of protecting greenhorns, they suddenly started to function as a unit again, just as Melina and Mernell had predicted. They continued to hone their style, taking on yet more work centered around the novices, until everyone came to know the Lineage of the White Wolf as one of the preeminent parties in leadership. The three were aware of their reputation, but they also knew there was always a bigger fish and never let it go to their heads.

And so the Lineage spent the next two years slowly taking on guild-recognized labyrinths, from the lowest-ranked to the highest, one at a time. They made average, respectable progress at first, but soon skyrocketed to fame as one of the most efficient teams in Grandol. But what spurred this on? A simple conversation at the guildhall they had happened to overhear.

"You gotta check your sources, man. No way those penny-pinching healers would start lowering their prices *now*, all of a sudden."

"I couldn't believe it either, but that's what I heard from some merchants who just got back from Shurule. They can't *all* be lying."

"Huh. Well, here's hoping there's not some catch to it."

"Got that right. I hear it all started 'cause o' some new S-rank healer. Bit of a weirdo, apparently."

"A weirdo? Yeah, healers doin' their jobs for cheap is pretty weird, I'll give ya that. But I'm not convinced this is all on the up and up yet."

“Yeah, right? I feel ya. But get this. They say that healer’s been weird for ages. He lived at some Adventurer’s Guild for a while.”

“Okay, now they’re just blowin’ smoke.”

“Yeah, probably.”

The Lineage listened to the boisterous adventurers, and one specific person immediately came to mind: Luciel.

“Guy’s an S-rank now? Shit, he’s showin’ us up,” Basura said.

“We gotta catch up and hit S-rank ourselves,” Sekiros added.

“Whaddya say we make sure we’re there before we see ‘im again?” Bazan suggested.

This new passion was the flame that fueled the party’s unnatural speed with which they tore through labyrinths, but they couldn’t have done it without the support of ex-receptionists Mernell and Melina, of course. The pair had made good use of the skills they’d picked up during their time as Adventurer’s Guild staff, gathering intel on dungeons, pointing the boys in the direction of less threatening labyrinths, and ensuring their path to the bigger, badder ones was smooth. Mernell also had a good eye for equipment and furnished the team with high-quality potions and magic items, while Melina cooked, planned routes, and handled the logistics of transportation and lodging. Thanks to their help, the only thing on the party’s mind was getting stronger and climbing the ranks.

Unfortunately, the Lineage couldn’t keep their momentum going forever. Their ceaseless progress was eventually put to a stop by the guild, who ordered the party to suspend work and take a moment to rest. This didn’t happen often, as it was guild policy to interfere in its members’ affairs as little as possible, but the Lineage had become too valuable to the constant flow of new adventurers to let them stretch themselves too thin.

The team protested at first, but only at first, because the guild mandate aside, they were forced to pause their path of labyrinth destruction for an entirely different reason: Mernell and Melina had become pregnant. Needless to say, Basura and Sekiros subsequently became too distracted, so their activities went

on hiatus for a while. The big question was whether to stay in Grandol or move back to Merratoni, where it was safer and easier to raise a family. Ultimately, though, they chose to stay.

Time passed, and the Lineage continued to take on modest work, when they received a direct, named request from the guild itself. The job: instruct and protect two new adventurers, foreign noblewomen who had hidden their identities to join the guild in secret.

Bazan wondered how he might weasel out of it, but then he recalled the relationship Brod and Luciel shared. To teach others is to learn as much about yourself as the student does about the subject at hand. And so he agreed.

A week later, the trio left for the guild to meet their clients, but what they found was a hall buzzing with rumors about an E-rank adventurer who had slain a dragon.

Bazan gave the gasbags a bored look. “Guess it’s a good thing they’ve got nothing better to do than gossip about bullshit.”

Sekiros put a hand to his chin pensively, then his eyes shot open. “Bazan, listen. They’re saying it was in Yenice.”

“Really? You think there’s an E-rank in Yenice who can take down a dragon? People say all sorts o’ shit.”

“Yeah. Right.”

But just then, they heard something else. “Yeah, for real! The dragonslayer’s a friggin’ healer!”

The trio exchanged glances.

“Did... Did you guys hear them say ‘healer’ just now?”

Sekiros shared in Bazan’s shock. “I sure did.”

As did Basura. “That’s some healer. Heh, I must be tired. I just thought of Luciel for some reason.” But there was no way that craven, spineless kid could have been a *dragonslayer*. It was simply impossible. “It can’t be.”

“But it’s true he went to Yenice to rebuild the Healer’s Guild there, yeah?”

Sekiros said.

“What if we...” Bazan shook his head. “No, guess we can’t see for ourselves.”

“Not with the girls the way they are.”

“Sorry, Bazan,” Basura said.

“It is what it is. We can do some investigating on our own. Don’t gotta see the guy in person to find out what really happened. He can’t be the dragonslayer. No way.”

“We should go a round next time we see him.”

Sekiros laughed. “Like he’d ever agree to that.”

“Don’t do anything you’re gonna regret,” Bazan warned. “You don’t want the Whirlwind smellin’ a fight.”

“You think I’m stupid? I know that,” Basura said. “I still can’t believe that kid could be a dragonslayer.”

Bazan remembered the young healer. He’d always had something to complain about. He was a whiner, that was for sure, but determined, and he never gave up once his mind was made. Bazan thought he could learn a thing or two from the kid. Maybe then he could stand with the greats like Brod, Galba, and Gulgar.

The party met with their clients, a pair of adventuring sisters, soon after... A meeting that would one day bring the Lineage and Luciel together once more.

✦ Kefin

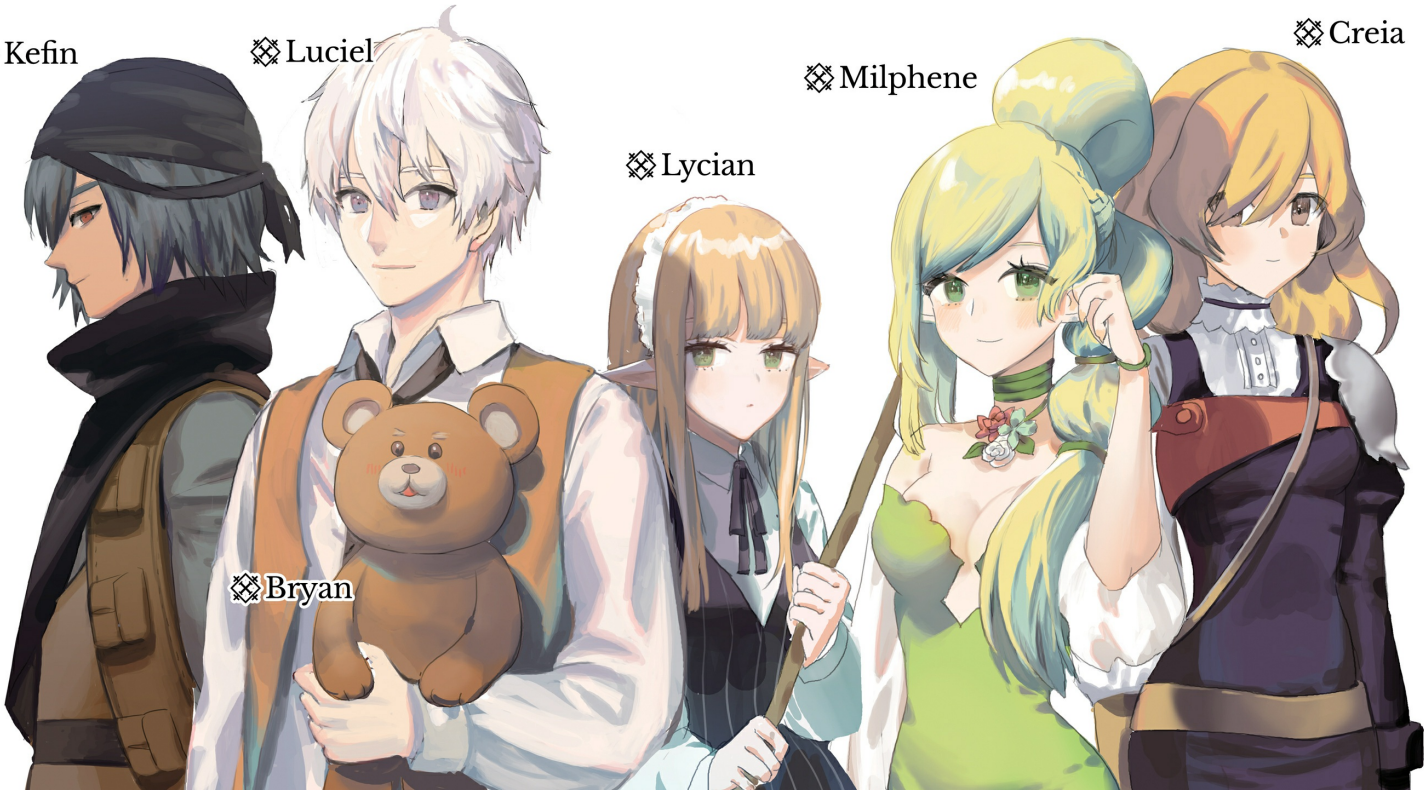
✦ Luciel

✦ Milphene

✦ Creia

✦ Lycian

✦ Bryan





Bonus Short Story

Precious Rivalry

Dhoran was doing some routine maintenance for the Order of Healing's slaves in his forge beneath the Yenice Healer's Guild when he heard yet another commotion break out from the neighboring bench.

"You lied to me, Pola! You didn't make that Lil Shiny whatsit! You copied it from a magic item purchased in the Holy city!"

"No. It's different. I made it better. I didn't even dismantle its parts."

Lycian growled.

"I still win. You're the one who broke it and made Chief mad."

"You do not! Mister Luciel and Dhoran scolded you last night for misusing so many magic stones!"

"Genius takes resources."

"*Mister Luciel* said that the winner is whoever can artifice the most universal and helpful tool. By my honor as an elf, I will not lose to you!"

"Well, I'm not losing either."

Dhoran cracked a smile. "It'll be a cold day in hell before those two start workin' together."

Pola had grown up surrounded by masterful craftsmen, just like her grandfather, in a town hidden away from sight. And being the only girl her age in the entire village, she'd been the object of much attention and pampering. It was only natural that she took a liking to the art of crafting. She'd been everyone's little granddaughter and had learned from the best, taking lessons and honing her skills from all manner of artisans who sought to nurture her young talents.

Once her education was all but complete, Dhoran had decided to journey out

with her. To their home: the Kingdom of Dwarves. He'd had high hopes that the trip would help her make friends with others her age, people who might take her skills to the next level. But those dreams were doomed to fall apart.

His granddaughter was a prodigy, one of the best, even among other dwarves, a race known for their innate crafting abilities. Pola believed that her talent for handiwork would make up for her clumsy way with words, however friendship was not what she earned for her efforts—only jealousy. The other dwarves started to whisper insults behind Dhoran's back, and Pola lost any hope of ever making a single friend. So she tuned out all from her mind but her craft.

Dhoran smiled as he remembered how far his granddaughter had come, feeling yet more gratitude to Luciel for giving her someone to talk to. Someone to compete with. He couldn't wait to see what those two would create together.

The dwarf couldn't contain his excitement and peeked in on the argument.

"It's complete! Behold, my invention purifies and circulates unclean air!"

Pola tested it out. "Not bad. But my artificial suns are way better."

"Ugh, I must admit, those are more magically complex. They are impressive."

The dwarf stuck her chest out. "Yes, they are."

Lycian grinned. "But Mister Luciel has no need for mass-produced artificial suns, and they're horribly costly in terms of magic stone usage."

"This isn't over."

"Not by a long shot!"

The two girls grabbed as many magic gems from the center table as they could carry, hauled them off to their stations, and got to work.

Dhoran smiled and returned to his own. "Much as I love that she's makin' friends, our stock o' gems isn't gonna last long at this rate. Shoulda set some aside for myself."

Three floors beneath the Yenice Healer's Guild, the team was hard at work.

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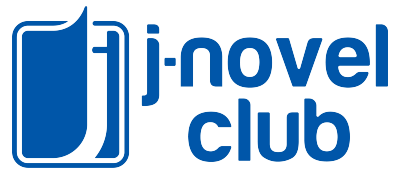
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The Great Cleric: Volume 5

by Broccoli Lion

Translated by Matthew Jackson Edited by Tess Nanavati

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